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Author: Sabina Simone (signatur author)
Supervisor: Sonya Louise Lundblad	
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Abstract

Protagonists or main characters are the center of a story. The plot revolves around these characters, and the readers are influenced to see the story and events through their perspectives. Using New Formalist theory and new scholarly readings about women's agency in Old English poetry, this thesis focuses on three female protagonists, Judith from *Judith*, Wealtheow from *Beowulf* and the woman speaker in *The Wife's Lament*. I will analyze these characters' power and agency within the poems and discuss their role within the society they belong to. Readers tend to imagine robust and strong men as the protagonists of heroic poems belonging to Old English culture due to the classical heroic model, the historical reality that most women did not fight in battle, and the well-known practice of 'peace weaving' in the period, but these models were not always the case. Women were much more than passive characters in these poems as suggested by not only those with leading roles such as Judith, Wealtheow, Grendel's dam but also by the apparently unlucky, 'helpless' women, like Hildeburh, Freawaru, and the wife in *The Wife's Lament*.

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Introduction

Judith, Wealthew and the speaker in *The Wife's Lament* act. They possess surprising strength, and they contribute, by virtue of the very poem they inhabit, to the understanding of Old English female characters as possessing equal status with their male counterparts. According to McNamara, Wemple, and Tuttle Hansen, women prior to 1066 in England were not just equal. They wielded economic and political power. Yet these, and other characters in *Beowulf* such as Hildeburh and Freawaru have also long been considered as powerless women, holding less power than men during troubled times in their stories. While they are characters, it is often difficult to separate chronicle from poetry in this period, and since there are real historical figures in *Beowulf*, these female characters have always held interest in terms of their potential for helping us understand what Anglo-Saxon women's lives were like and whether they held a sense of individuality and independence. Therefore, it makes sense to discuss the agency and expression of thought and emotion by these characters. Hildeburh in *Beowulf* is described by the *Beowulf* poet as *geomuru ides*, and according to the *Bosworth Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *geomuru ides* can be translated as 'mournful woman' (1117b.) Hildeburh was the daughter of the Danish King Hoc (line 1076), who functions as *freoðuwebbe* (1942) meaning 'peace weaver' marrying the Frisian king, Finn, only to see this peace breakdown in front of her eyes. She ultimately loses both her beloved son and her brother Hnaef in battle. Finn is slayed at the end, too, (line 1152) and Hildeburh is returned to Denmark (line 1159). Despite her high position in the Frisian tribe as a queen, she does not have a voice in the poem, and all the reader knows about her is through her actions. How she acts because of all these terrible losses is untold, perhaps left intentionally for the reader to piece together. What her actions say and do not say are a visible sign of her strength; she is a queen and keeps maintaining her role as such with dignity. Her inaction speaks to the way the poem is situated between growing understanding of Christian virtue and the problematic nature of the law of blood feud. The idea that the reader does not get complete insight on her emotions should not be seen only as an act of passivity, but one of strength. Heroes in epic poems are stoic, keeping their calm during emotionally impactful scenes as the wanderer in *The Wanderer*, describes in his lowest moment:

8a	Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce mine ceare cwīpan. Nis nu cwicra nan þe ic him modsefan minne durre sweotule aseġan. Ic to soþe wat	Often (or always) I had alone to speak of my trouble each morning before dawn. There is none now living to whom I dare clearly speak of my innermost thoughts. I know it truly,
12a	þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw, þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde, healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.	that it is in men a noble custom, that one should keep secure his spirit-chest (mind), guard his treasure-chamber (thoughts), think as he wishes. (Anglo-Saxons.net Lines 8-18)

It was customary to hold in emotions and thoughts, to keep inside, ‘hordcofan’ as the wanderer explains that to ‘fæste binde’ them is noble ‘eorle’, The *Beowulf* poet makes sure the same goes for the ill-destined Hildeburh putting her in the same heroic realm as the male figures in Old English heroic poetry. An explanation of why Old English heroes are void of emotions during their climax scenes is given by Barbara Schmitz, in *Judith and Holofernes: An Analysis of the Emotions in the Killing Scene*. She explains that the heroes lack of emotions might be linked to a much older tradition. Schmitz writes that:

another interesting reason for the omission of emotions could be found in the pagan philosophical discussion of the classical and Hellenistic age . . . Socrates, as described in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, shows nearly no emotions in the face of certain death, but is distinguished by heroic self-control . . . He displays total control over his emotions and lives up to the standard that a genuine philosopher should control his emotions and bow to the *logos*; it is a behavior free of emotions and the tragic (188).

This explanation might help modern reader understand why female characters such as Hildeburh are much more than passive bystanders in this epic poem. Their adherence to *logos* or logic and reason that leads to certain actions (or sometimes lack of) show a strength of character that modern readers today might miss. Furthermore, the Plato's notion of *logos* carried with it a sense of the universal source of all knowledge, a higher power from which humankind draws strength (Cross 448). Hildeburh, therefore warrants further investigation to discover whether *geomuru ides* paints her as overly emotional and shuttled from tribe to tribe by men or indicates a strong woman following tradition dutifully at a low point when one might rather flop down. Another seemingly hopeless, trapped 'peace weaver' for this kind of inquiry is Freawaru, daughter of Hrothgar and Wealtheow to be married off to the king of the Heaðobards, a tribe at war with the Danes. She has political power, too it seems, but we are given no sign of her expressing emotions about her fate or *wyrd*.

Hope and the sense of hopeless, is a powerful emotion in epic poems, and it is recurrent in *Beowulf*, most readily expressed by male figures. Beowulf finds Hrothgar in despair multiple times throughout the story, once before Grendel is slayed by the hero, and again when his best friend Æschere is killed by Grendel's mother. Hrothgar finds himself hopeless, and Beowulf says that:

Let your sorrow end! It is better for us all
To avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.
Each of us will come to the end of this life
On earth; he who can earn it should fight
For the glory of his name; fame after death
Is the noblest of goals. Arise, guardian
Of this kingdom, let us go, as quickly as we can,
And have a look at this lady monster (lines 1384–1391).

In this case, Hrothgar being hopeless is connected to loss, death, violence and the only way to bring back hope is through more death and violence so as to get rewarded by fate or *wyrd*. Beowulf references *wyrd* and fate to Hrothgar in line 455, when the warrior exclaims 'Fate must go as it will.' Only by slaying Grendel's mother can Beowulf restore Hrothgar's faith in getting rid of the evermore threat in his halls. But the sense of hopelessness that Freawaru is

experiencing is not connected to abundance of violence and death, but the active inaction in that regard. She is a resilient character that is married away to Ingeld, and she is offered as a peace weaver to stop the feud between Danes and Heaðobards, but as Beowulf predicts, the marriage may not have been enough to bring peace (2025-2068). Her marriage results in a failure, and Freawaru fails at the only task the men around her intended for her to succeed in. But can scholars truly believe that is Freawaru's actions or lack of responsible for the failed marriage? If we are to focus on Beowulf's prediction:

Thus he urges and eggs him all the time /with keenest words, till occasion offers / that Freawaru's thane, for his father's deed, / after bite of brand in his blood must slumber, / losing his life; but that liegeman flies/ living away, for the land he kens. / And thus be broken on both their sides / oaths of the earls, when Ingeld's breast / wells with war-hate, and wife-love now / after the care-billows cooler grows. (lines 2067-2075)

Beowulf predicts that the death of her father will be enough to cause both parties to break the fragile peace, making Freawaru's attempt at peace-making useless. His words heavily imply how fate plays a role and how all of this is out of Freawaru's choice. If one is to focus on her actions alone, the attempt at making peace by marrying to the enemy is enough to consider her an active character, but her results nullify any of her actions. But like Hildeburh, Judith and the woman in *The Wife's Lament*, these 'hopeless women' are resilient, and therefore have a certain hope in ... but in a different way than their male heroic counterparts. They show a different sense of heroic hope that is balanced with a realistic lack of it, connected directly to their resilience.

I plan to compare these three women, Wealtheow, Judith and the wife while taking into consideration the *ethos* surrounding agency at the time they belong to and conducting close reading, analyzing each of their climax scenes in particular to further identify their unique female agency. At the same time, I will investigate Grendel's dam briefly and tangentially to the other women. I will be using the following definition of climax scene by Robert Herrick and Lindsay T. Damon in *Composition and Rhetoric for Schools*. They write that climax is a turning point in a narrative and full of tension and drama in accordance with our practices in literary formal analysis. However, in *'Imagining the Literary in Medieval English'* New Formalist Andrew Galloway suggests we treat medieval art on its own terms beginning with their forms rather than

our superimposed contemporary formal categories (224). I will be looking for the height of the character's impact on the Old English heroic poems' key themes, ones concerned with 'conflict', 'home' and 'kin' protection in the climax scenes. Medieval literature has within it a 'narrative specialness' according to Galloway, which can be glimpsed at key moments, elevated ones, like what we would consider the climax of a short story or novel. He believes medieval texts focus on the climax scenes in a way that does not place the poetic fictive in the primary role but the action itself (225). In this way, social and religious issues are addressed in the poems (224-225). The climax scenes will be discussed in these terms which as Galloway explains, 'begin with their forms rather than our concerns,' and lead us to the height of the character's significance and the nature of the social issue of female agency. The key aspect of their forms that Galloway explores will be explained, and the 'climax' scenes I will focus on with Galloway's insight in this thesis are Judith killing Holofernes in his tent, Wealtheow's speech in the hall of men and the areas in the poem when the woman in *The Wife's Lament* speaks about her exile. I will focus on why these scenes and moments carry such an emotional impact, why they represent both action and efficacious inaction, and why it matters that women are the center of these scenes and not men. Further, his thesis will discuss women's agency in Old English Literature by analyzing the function of the characters of Judith in *Judith*, the wife in *The Wife's Lament* and Wealhþeow in *Beowulf* in terms of their function within their own narrative also providing historical context to analyze their position in society and what that means for our own sense of women's roles. I will discuss if the characters are passive in their own femininity or active and compare what that meant in pre-Conquest England as well as how it resonates with us today.

To achieve this, my chapters will be divided as follows:

Chapter one will be dedicated to Judith. I aim to explore the character of Judith in the epic, *Judith*, by analyzing her climax scene when killing Holofernes. I will discuss her agency and if she can be considered a passive character or not as well as the problem of how these epics problematize and praise violence and vengeance. I will investigate how her femininity is to be viewed in light of the different sense of the feminine working in *Beowulf*.

Chapter two will be dedicated to Wealtheow and it will explore how she is portrayed, why is it significant, and the reason behind her speech. The speech she gives is her climax because of how she is portrayed, covered in gold, and looking magnificent. Her speech should also be given to her husband, but instead she is the one speaking and further proving her

importance in the scene. In a sense, her words seem to admonish and bring hope to the hall of men and sets her aside from her hopeless husband who was not able to do as such. It is an impactful moment; Beowulf restored peace and altered the *wyrd* and Wealhþeow is the one speaking on behalf of her people and her family to ensure future safety. I will also discuss her agency and analyze if she is only functions as peace maker. Finally I would like to add that this thesis will use two different translations, one from Elaine Treharne in *Old and Middle English c890-c.1450 and anthology*, for the lines of the poem from 320 to 1250. Treharne's translation ends at the line 1250, so for the remaining lines I will be referencing to the translated poem in prose by Donaldson, E. Talbot, and Nicholas Howe titled *Beowulf*.

Chapter three will be about the wife in *The Wife's Lament*. I will analyze her exile and how she describes her current situation. And concluding with a discussion on whether her character is a passive example of women's agency. Chapter four will be about Grendel's dam and Hildeburh, I will discuss these two characters to compare them to the previous three and argue that women in Old English Poems are much more than passive heroes, their seemingly hopeless attitude is in fact much more than that. There is heroism in hope and the lack of it, and hopelessness and hopefulness are something we see in other male characters as well such as Hrothgar. I will further develop the concept of hope in heroes to further analyze how this concept belongs to female characters as well.

The conclusion will reflect on the discussed chapters and aim to answer the following questions: What do the climax scenes for the wife, Judith and Wealhþeow signify for their female agency? Are they important because they hold emotional impact? Or what else should we notice? Why were these scenes given to female heroines and not their male counterparts? Are the three characters passive in their own femininity? Are these characters breaking free from the stereotypical female passivity? Are these characters showing a deep and complex sense of agency?

By analyzing these characters and answering the questions addressed through the project, I will bring light upon women's roles in heroic poems and complicate the peace weaver role as much more than passive objectification by males who enjoy all the power. In *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen pull together an extensive study over the characters mentioned in this proposal. By using their text as one of the sources for the master thesis, this project will enter a long-time discussed topic of women's

roles in Old English Literature. But first, let's take a look at the secondary sources informing my understanding of the historical, social background for this project and those that have influenced my chapter work on *The Wife's Lament*, *Judith*, and the women in *Beowulf*.

Literature Review and Background

The background of Old English poetry follows from the 597 conversions to Christianity and the rise of literacy thereafter. In Old English culture some women of high birth lived in monasteries and had access to libraries. The monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England were double monasteries, with men living in one aisle and the women in the other. Often the Abbess was the head of both houses. While the Abbott was the leader of the men, according to the *Eleventh Edition of Encyclopædia Britannica* published in 1911, an Abbess was the female superior of the women's aisle:

Abbess, the female superior of an abbey or convent of nuns . . . By Celtic usage abbesses presided over joint houses of monks and nuns. This custom accompanied Celtic monastic missions to France and Spain, and even to Rome itself. At a later period, A.D. 1115, Robert, the founder of Fontevraud, committed the government of the whole order, men as well as women, to a female superior. (1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 1).

Furthermore, the abbess is elected by her own sisters, and after the Council Of Trent it was decided that the qualifying age to become an abbess was forty years old. In Celtic usage, the abbess was leader of the joint-houses of monks and nuns. Robert Fontevrayd in A.D. 1115 committed the government of joint-houses to a female superior.x (Watts 2)

Diane Watts writes in *Lost books: Hildelith and Literary Culture of Barking Abbey* that abbesses were sometimes in position of power: 'the literary culture of Barking Abbey, a vital center of Anglo-Saxon learning, when it was under the rule of its second abbess, Hildelith, in the late seventh and early eighth century'(1). Her account shows how clearly women held not only had powerful positions (economic and political), but they had access to libraries. Therefore, it makes sense to explore whether it is possible to learn if women might have helped men transcribe many of the Old English poems, and thus were more than characters in them; they may have played a vital role in their existence. For example, Wogan-Browne in *The Hero in*

Christian Reception: Ælfric and Heroic Poetry discusses how epic poems did not emerge from only a 'male-to-male' obligation (230) instead, she suggest that women played a bigger role in the contribution of poems such as *Judith* and *The Wife's Lament*. But not all women were in the higher classes and able to become abbesses or marry princes. This thesis will also explore the reality of women during A.D. 1000 who did not have a voice, and try to discover whether these characters speak and act for them in any way. The Danish ruler of England in the later part of the period, King Cnut, enacted laws to punish adulterous women:

A woman who commits adultery with another man whilst her husband is still alive, and is found out, shall suffer public disgrace, and her husband will have all her property, and she will lose her nose and ears. If she denies it and fails to purge herself, let a bishop take control and punish her severely (Whitelock 470).

Was she given a fair trial? Or was a man's accusation enough? While different laws existed at different periods and regions in pre-Conquest England, remains of women belonging to such gruesome times have been found by archeologists who are now analyzing further the remains excavated around the 1960's. The article titled '*Anglo-Saxon Woman Mutilated as Punishment*' from HeritageDaily reads, 'Radiocarbon dating of the skull suggests the remains dates from around AD 776 to AD 899, with the woman's age being estimated to 15-18 years old. The skull also shows no signs of healing, suggesting that she died shortly after injuries were inflicted' (HeritageDaily). Among the findings, one example was the skull of a woman around the age of fifteen, whose nose was severely mutilated, and the wound never healed. Archeologists suggest she died shortly after the wounds were inflicted.

The social status of these women is peculiar and worth a closer look via researchers like Caroline Dunn, author of *Stolen Women In Medieval England Rape, Abduction and Adultery 1100-1500*. She writes, 'The adultery prosecutions found in the Church courts, combined with the secular abduction allegations that expose adultery and self-divorce, reveal that some English commoners experienced surprising levels of marital fluidity'(16). This finding suggests that the ones afflicted by the cruel laws of Cnut were higher status women. Were lower class women, less in public view, spared? Would they have been exiled like the speaker in *The Wife's Lament*?

It is important to understand the social challenges of lower-class women and widows if we are to discuss the character of Judith. The book of *Judith* is not canonical in the *Bible*, it is an apocryphal book of the *Old Testament*. Schmidt in his entry 'Apocrypha', in the book *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* states that the word *apocryphal* derives from ancient Greek *apokryptein* meaning 'hidden,' or 'secret things' and it is a term used to specify which books are not in the canon of scripture (Schmidt 96). To the degree the bible functions as 'history,' Judith is, thus, also a real historical figure, such as some characters in *Beowulf* are. Stuart Elden, author of *Place Symbolism and Land Politics in Beowulf* reflects on how the poetry and magnificence of *Beowulf* often overshadow its historical context by saying, 'Beowulf is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content' (448). One of the most notorious characters, known also as a historical figure, is indeed Hygelac, 'there is historical evidence for the battle and death of Hygelac, at least, in Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, and the *Gesta Francorum*' (457). The *Finnsburg Fragment*, an old English poem narrating the event of Hnæf at 'Finn's Fort' is another example of those historical figures in *Beowulf* and further proof of their existence. Their historical importance is vital for this research because of the anonymity of the writer we are still unsure of when to date *Beowulf* and *Judith*. Because this thesis inquires about the ability of Judith, Wealtheow and the woman in *The Wife's Lament* to show us how women used to live at their time, dating the poems is important, and so is the possibility that these characters were, themselves, actual historical figures as well as representatives of actual women living in the Anglo-Saxon period

The Wife's Lament

This thesis will analyze the woman in *The Wife's Lament*, to do that, it is important to do a close reading of the poem together with reviewing literature criticizing her character's passivity. The wife in *The Wife's Lament* is deemed by critics an example of passivity. Alan Renoir in 'A Reading Context for *The Wife's Lament*' deemed the poem as one of many stories of sad, suffering women in Germanic tradition, together with other women such as Hildeburh from *Beowulf*. He describes Hildeburh as 'the most unfortunate human being in *Beowulf*' (230) since all the events happening to her are beyond her own choice. He also states that she must become an 'active participant' to her own sad tale as she supervises the cremation of her son in

line 1114-1117. Renoir further translates the term *geomuru ides* as sad lady, he writes ‘No wonder, then, that this *sad lady* (*geomuru ides*, 1075b) should mourn with *sad songs* (*geomrode giddum*, 1118)’ (231). This translation is semantically different from the one given by *Bosworth Toller* as ‘mournful woman’(117b). His depiction of both the woman in *The Wife’s Lament* and Hildeburh are hopeless and unfortunate, lacking the power to change the course of events.

Joyce Hill in her essay ‘*Aet waes geomuru ides A Female Stereotype Examined*’ in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. by Helen Damico and Alexandra H. Olsen, challenges the sad woman stereotype. The author mentions, ‘The resulting historical stereotype can hinder our perception of the nature and significance of the woman’s role within the royal circle almost as much as the straightforward lack of information’ (235). Her essay can aid the reader on questions of agency, reason, and emotion to understand the deeper meaning of her situation and allow speculation about the intentions of the wife in *The Wife’s Lament*.

While Renoir might interpret her lament as the weep of a sad woman, Barry Ruth Straus in *Women’s words as weapons: Speech as Action in ‘The Wife’s Lament’* argues that, ‘The apparent passivity is surely there. . .The narrator of *The Wife’s Lament* does more than sit and weep; she also speaks’ (3). She is telling her story, and because there is a limited amount of Old English poetry, her voice reflects the voices of all the peace weavers who did not have one. Strauss explores the different sections of the poem, three of them, and concludes that while in the first section the wife ‘asserts’ the situation, in the second she recalls what has happened and in the third she ‘either predicts the future or expresses what she would like it to be’ (3). By telling her story, she brings agency not only to herself but to all women who belong to her same situation, and in Strauss’ words, ‘she goes beyond the passive endurance of her fate’ (3). In the end, the wife hides in a cave, seemingly helpless and while some sources argue that that ending is a curse. I will look into this fascinating character and argue about how that ending is not just agency, but agency that seeks a higher order for the sake of justice. The source of the speaker’s injustice will be explored. For example, in the article by Dorothy Ann Bray called, ‘*A Woman’s Loss and Lamentation: Heledd’s Song and The Wife’s Lament*’ Bray hypothesized that *The Wife’s Lament* is much more than an elegy about personal grief. It’s a window to a much more complicated political conflict in the background. Bray writes, ‘It is possible that *The Wife’s Lament*, like Heledd’s lament, is the formalization of a personal grief against the larger backdrop of a political conflict and may have been part of a heroic cycle’ (149). Having a bigger political

conflict in the background could elevate the female voice of the story and reevaluate her function not only in the poem, but among the male heroic set of stories retold for the sake of cultural identity and preservation.

Judith

This thesis works from the idea that Judith is a widow, a maiden of God and a woman. She takes matters into her own hands, and with the decapitation of her enemy, she brings a victory to the Hebrew people. Although strong, her character may not have been an example of how women were living during the period, but she is an example of what was acceptable and even admired in feminine behavior after the 597 conversions when the bible becomes a touchstone in the culture. There were, indeed, feminine expectations for Hebrew women of God, both in their religious and domestic life, and it is logical to assume Anglo-Saxon women emulated them as both wives and daughters. In *Ephesians 5:22*, St. Paul writes that while men should give their lives for their families, wives should submit to their husbands (Biblehub). As a woman in Christian as well as Hebrew culture, one experiences and adheres to a patriarchal family structure. According to Jarry Gladson in *The Role of Women in the Old Testament Outside the Pentateuch*, ‘This stance of woman under man meant that her essence as a human being is linked with her function as a companion to him’ (1). In other words, women were supposed to be companions to men and went from being linked to their father, to being attached to their husband.

As we investigate the individuality and agency of women, these facts of women’s existence will come under scrutiny especially with regard to Judith’s characterization. Rabbi’s separated women from men during prayers because women’s bodies could distract them during prayers. Despite this, the women’s role in the synagogue was active as they attended it during holidays and *Shabbat*, and around the 11th century women took an even more active role in their community. In the beginning of the 13th century having women in the *Synagogue* was the norm, one of their tasks was to make their synagogue beautiful by crafting curtains (Gladson 1). Although men and women were fundamentally equal, some differences applied to them as Gladson details, ‘record is also clear that the role of woman in the fall of the race somewhat altered this position and put man in the role of master’ (Gladson 2). Gladson claims that domestically, women who were not happy in their marriage because they found their husband

repugnant could ask for a divorce. The writer continues by saying that if a man was absent three or more years, women could remarry. Laws prohibiting domestic violence were also in place. Despite these laws, a woman in Jewish culture had to be devoted to her husband but was not seen as just property (Gladson 10). Uncovering connections between biblical figures and their devotion and Anglo-Saxon figures shed light on Old English female characters. Devotion is a topic with diverse meaning according to different historical periods. Men in *Beowulf* are devoted to their lord and kin in the continuing pre-Christian Germanic tribal *ethos*. This bond of *kinship* was so strong that it could bring tribes and entire nations to war. *Kinship* is a highly discussed term among researchers, Ellen Spolsky writes in *Old English Kinship Terms and Beowulf* that: ‘The *Beowulf* Poet seems to have used the kinship system . . . to increase the epic stature of his characters . . . Beowulf . . . Hygelac . . . participate in archaic kinds of relationships and are dignified by their connection to the days of yore’ (233). Nepotic relationships are important and highlight why a warrior must be ready to avenge one’s lord or *kin* and bend *wyrd*. *Wyrd* is a highly discussed concept in which some have translated as fate, much like a force that necessitates a certain code of action to manage it, one that brings warriors together to act and honor their kinship. *Wyrd* and God are not the same concept even if both seem to have powerful agency within *Beowulf*. Early R. Anderson, author of *Understanding Beowulf as an Indo-European Epic* says, ‘God and *wyrd* are not synonymous, for *wyrd* is impersonal, and cannot know anything’ (407). The *Beowulf* poet summarizes what happens after Beowulf wins against Grendel, and writes

(Hrothgar) ordered that one man should pay compensation of gold for the one whom Grendel had previously killed through wickedness, as he would have done to more of them if the wise God and the courage of that man had not prevented that fate. (lines 1050 – 1057).

Interestingly the poet mentions fate and God within the same line, suggesting that both Beowulf’s courage and God’s will have a say over ‘fate’. This suggests that *wyrd* is not a fate pre-decided, but one that is constantly shaping. Weil in her article *Grace under Pressure ‘Hand-Words’, ‘Wyrd’ and ‘Free Will’ in Beowulf* also talks about *wyrd* as ‘to shape’ (Weil, 1). Moreover, Beowulf himself references *wyrd* in the poem. ‘Fate often saves / the man who is not

doomed to die when his courage is good' (Beowulf, lines 572-573). His words suggest that there is a way to 'work' *wyrd* to someone's will. As Anderson writes, 'Wyrð is not an extension of God. Quite the opposite, *wyrd* is independent of God' (408). Could it mean that *wyrd* is in the hand of heroes themselves? Of course, this could not suggest that *wyrd* can be altered all the time, but as Beowulf said himself, 'fate . . . saves . . . when his courage is good.' (Beowulf, lines 572-573). His words suggest that there are certain occasions when heroes can manipulate fate to certain extent. As Anderson puts it, 'Heroic intervention is possible only at critical moments' (409). This study aims to discover the general sense of devotion in terms of the *comitatus code* as it applies to the female characters in these poems. In turn it will suggest that women have individuality and equality, but through their femininity negotiating *wyrd* and the culture's emphasis on duty and courage in their own way.

Judith and the Problem with Grendel's Dam

In Old English poems, women are viewed as both strong and weak, let's investigate that. Women are viewed as having agency in powerful inaction but also not 'damsels in distress' which is to say there is a delicate tension in terms of the women participating in the violence and bloodshed that is mostly done by men. Whether Judith participates in this but does not perpetuate blood feud is an important question I will take up. The way Judith compares with non-violent women in *Beowulf*, then is a follow-up question to those raised in the previous section, and in that vein, the enigma that is Grendel's mother in the poem, also bears some consideration.

Grendel's dam is the descent of Cain, from *Genesis*, chapter four, and comparing her to Wealhþeow, the speaker in *The Wife's Lament*, and Judith would be unfair because of her inhuman nature, but her addition will be invaluable when reflecting on devotion and the concept of hopelessness and the female nature of this emotion. She brings blood, vengeance, and although described as a woman she acts like a male antihero. She is a mother who has lost hope. Jane Chance, in 'The Problem of Grendel's mother' from Damico and Olsen's *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, claims that Grendel's mother is described as a human: 'Grendel's mother is also described in human and social terms. She is . . . called a *wif unhyre* 'a monstrous woman' and *ides aglæcwif* 'a lady-monster woman' (249). Grounding her as a woman will give a great insight into a feminine character that also represents blood and feud (like her male counterparts). A small chapter will be dedicated to her character and focus on the hopeless

blood feud she represents and bring insights into the female agency of the other three characters, particularly Hildeburh who does not get satisfaction under the law in that way but pertaining to the others as well. The author goes on to reflect over the uses of *kennings*,

It seems clear from these kennings that Grendel's mother inverts the Germanic roles of the mother and queen, or lady. She has the form of a woman. . . and is weaker than a man . . . But unlike most mothers and queens, she fights her own battles (249).

The author discusses the use of the kennings and the reason for them while making an overall reflection over the time period and women's role in the society at the time of *Beowulf*. This reflection is done to highlight how differently does Grendel's dam act. She is a woman yet she acts as a man, she seek vengeance with blood and violence similarly to Beowulf and Hrothgar, yet she weeps for her son as Freawaru and other peace waver do for their own lost family (Chance 250). This discussion will be further developed in chapter four together with Trilling's reflection of Grendel's dam. Renée Trilling in '*Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again*', says:

Traditional critical paradigms have generally failed to come to grips with the character of Grendel's mother in Beowulf. As a monster in the heroic order, and as a female in a masculine world, she confounds simple definitions and crosses the boundaries that define the limits of agency. Grendel's mother functions as a nexus for the representation of the many dialectical tensions - male/female, human/monster, hall/wilderness, feud/peace, symbolic/semiotic - that both underwrite and critique the poem's symbolic order (1).

Grendel's mother is both a monster and a woman. It is difficult to define her agency, even more to compare her to the other women in this thesis. She presents a duality within her own nature, she weeps like a human and act as a monster; Trilling explains how she has both masculine qualities and feminine ones that undermines and criticize the reason behind such choices. Why did the Beowulf poet decide to put so much emphasis in her battle with Beowulf? The duality of Grendel's mother sets her apart from the other female characters in *Beowulf*, but exploring her

characterization will throw the nature of their individual agency as well as Judith's into stark relief.

Wealtheow

This thesis will also explore the key concepts already mentioned in the relationship of agency and political power. To do so, I will analyze Wealtheow and her speech, specifically why she is giving it instead of her husband. Damico and Olsen in *New Readings of Women in Old English Literature* analyze Wealtheow and compares her to the Valkyrie Figure. This chapter will consider these findings while doing a close reading of Wealtheow speech and comparing the character to the other women. Questioning why a woman like Wealtheow holds a speech instead of her husband also brings up different questions of Judith: Why does the destiny of an entire nation befall on the shoulders of Judith? What importance does Holofernes' decapitation hold? What was the purpose of providing injured female figures like Hildeburh, the Wife, and Freawaru who seem somewhat helpless, but whose voices we hear coming through time to decry the devastation of blood feud? How do we champion women's agency and at the same time push back the idea of the passivity we see in this text attributed to women? Both female and male heroes are strong, yet only male heroes walk down the path of vengeance and violence while the women seem to more readily set forth Christian heroism so prevalent in Old English texts like *The Dream of the Rood* where Christ, the passive 'warrior' died so that humankind would live. This sort of sacrifice is arguably an example of feminism heroism as Nancy Klenk Hill writes about Jesus' sacrifice in '*The savior as woman*'. She discusses that, 'He passively accepted his suffering, knowing that a new birth would occur. Like a woman, he suffered that a stranger might live' (2). This interpretation of female heroism might bring to light that, although female heroism is different from its male counterpart, it's still valid and would reevaluate female characters as much more than the sad women as Renoir wrote. Indeed, it would allow us to consider whether and how each character is forward-looking in terms of alternative ways of dealing with grief.

Methodology

Lastly as part of my introduction, I believe it's important to point out one way this thesis looks very different from its very humbling beginnings. I was originally interested in comparing

Old English poems like *Beowulf* to what I believed was its Greek counterpart *The Iliad* and wanted to do so by doing a close analysis of the characters Beowulf and Judith and compare them to Achilles and Helen of Troy. The more I read about Judith though, the more I came to the realization that I wanted to center my thesis on her, specifically when reading her climax scene of the decapitation of Holofernes I was shocked. How could a woman at the time be described with such bravery? How could she enter the tent fully knowing she might lose her life, and still be dedicated to kill her enemy? How could she be so stoic when facing her adversities? That is when I understood I had a female stereotype in mind of a powerless woman in need of help and always shadowing a king. Because of my hunger for this particular knowledge, I decided to investigate women's agency in Anglo-Saxon's poetry, specifically Judith, *Wealtheow* and the wife. There are a variety of methods I could be using for investigating these character's agency, but because I aim to discuss these character's femininity particularly considering the time they live in and by close reading their climax scenes, I will read these texts in light of the New Formalism movement. This movement started in America as a reaction to literary scholarship in the 19th and 20th century and aims to interpret the text not only for its formal content but also in consideration of the time it was written. The project depends on Andrew Galloway's lens for unpacking medieval literature, specifically his essay '*Imagining the Literary in Medieval English*' where he discusses what a literary text is, i.e. what makes a medieval text 'literature'. He writes, 'The question also emerges from the material itself' (210). By saying so, he introduces the core belief of New Formalism: the analysis of the material itself. A medieval text can be considered so not only in the way it is written (the metric values) but also for the content in the text (Galloway 210). Galloway not only investigates the nature of the text but does so by inviting the reader to do closer analysis of the text by its formal elements and understand the material's content by 'combining linguistic elements based on equivalencies in *form* such as meter or other formal elements of verbal art' (210). This methodology is vital for this thesis, not only because of its focus on characterization of the protagonist, but because I will be analyzing plot, specifically climax, but also *kennings*, and diction in light of the overall content of the poems and historical background which includes acknowledgment of an oral tradition. A medieval text forces the reader to deal with it in a performative way, to obtain a reaction from modern readers in light of its early reception. In Galloway's words,

‘Aurality’ and ‘mouvance’ are not the only ways in which medieval texts force us to deal with them collectively and performatively. To return to where we began, how can we deal with drama – both in general, and in terms of the particularly elusive claims to ‘aesthetic production’ that medieval English drama presents? (232).

Galloway calls for an analysis of the text, to immerse oneself in the reading and abandon modern reading lenses and focusing on the material, on the language, metric, kennings and dealing with all these formal elements collectively. Only this way the scholars will obtain a response and reaction that ‘the authors’ of these texts might have wished us to receive. This is explained in much more detailed in the theory of the ‘concrete universal’, so called by Hegel. The concrete universal reference to the idea that earlier scholars believed a text to be ‘a very individual thing or a very universal thing’ (Wimsatt 262). In other words, a text exists just as it is and no more lenses should be used to interpret it. The text itself is individual and at the same time universal. The concrete universal raise questions by itself, if a text is individual and universal at the same time. Isn’t an original text always individual? What makes a text universal? As Wimsatt writes in *The Structure of the concrete universal in literature*, art always aims at being somewhat individual (267). When it comes to this concept in a literature field, it becomes even more complex. What a work of literature truly is, is still discussed between scholars today both in its own nature and limitations (What’s a work of literature? Does any piece of text count as a work of literature?) but because this is not the main focus on this thesis, I will not divert the conversation over the nature of work of literature, instead let us pretend that we agree on what makes a work of literature. How can this work of literature be individual and universal at the same time? A work of literature, in Wimsatt’s words,

Is a work of art is a complex of detail. a composition so complicated of human values that its interpretation is dictated by the understanding of it, and so complicated as to seem in the highest degree individual-a concrete universal (272).

His words convey exactly what concrete universal stand for, a complicated composition of intricate work. Andrew Galloway’s responds to Wimsatt’s interpretation of the concrete

universal, and while Wimsatt's words would apply directly to Medieval Literature, Galloway argues that it is more complicated than that to discover a medieval text. To make his point in *Imagining the Literary in Medieval English*, he introduces another scholar by the name Aronson-Lehavi. Lehavi argues that Wimsatt's ideas are outdated and cannot be applied to Medieval Literature because the readers would miss the nuance of words and meanings if they were to review a text as an individual topic. Galloway continues by saying that we should review the entirety of a text instead of 'trying to separate the actions and experiences of such drama from the actions and experiences of sacred history – which subsequent dramatic and cultural history in any case did' (234). This is the stance I will be taking while doing close reading of the three texts of *Judith*, *Beowulf* and *The Wife's Laments*, it would be a mistake to not discuss how history might affect the agency of these women.

Galloway's *Imagining the Literary in Medieval English* would not be enough to interpret the poems in this master thesis, nor would it be pertinent without. My focus is Judith, the wife, and Wealtheow's agency specifically if they appear passive or active in their own femininity. The earlier sections of 'Literature Review' provided insight on the arguments of the contributors to this collection and the way their arguments inform each female character I am interested in, so to do this analysis of passivity or activity, I will do close readings of the translated original texts in light of the emotions the characters show (or not) and claim that these characters were more than hopeless damsels. Olsen and Damico, together with the contributors, explore women's power and lack of it in their book *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, and say that 'The reconstruction of a female past; the examination of woman's sexuality and her image in folklore and myth; the use of language in differentiating women; and the reexamination of the stereotype' (1). Damico and Olsen manage to break down the feminine character in understandable stages of a woman's life, of their historical past, the expectation of a woman (in folklore and myth), the way women used to speak and the abolition of the weak woman stereotype. Their interpretations and studies will aid me in identifying the three women's agency and answer the questions I asked in this thesis.

Chapter 1.1 The Old English Poem *Judith* and the apocryphal *Book of Judith*

This chapter will investigate the background information of the poem of *Judith*, its date, location and implication with the *Old Testament* while contemplating on the diving nature of the

two *Judith*, one who belonged in the Old English Poem *Judith* and the other apocryphal titled *Book of Judith*. This analysis is to clarify some misunderstandings that might rise from the two different versions and to bring awareness to the multifaceted character of Judith.

Because of *Beowulf*'s fame, the manuscript is often referred to as *The Beowulf Manuscript*. Dating the *Beowulf* manuscript which also contains *Judith* is the subject of conflict between scholars from all over the world. The problem with dating *Beowulf* is that the manuscript in which both *Beowulf* and *Judith* were found is dated around 1025, and it is the only written copy that reached modern readers. So, when were *Beowulf* and *Judith* composed? It can be between 725 to 1025, and the problem in picking any of these two dates is that there is a difference of 250 years in between-- and whichever date is picked changes the way *Beowulf* should be interpreted. If this project decides to believe that the poem was composed first in 725, it means that around eight generations of people preserved the story (probably orally) and that the story has been subject to change to relate to their audiences. Thanks to historians, it is possible to understand and stabilize the timeframe in which the *Beowulf* manuscript belongs to because Hygelac, *Beowulf*'s uncle, is a real character who lived and died around the 520, 6th century. He is mentioned in *History of the Goths* by Jordanes and in the anonymously written book *Liber Monstrorum*, a catalogue of mysterious creatures dated around late seventh and early eight centuries. It is also important to understand that the characters in *Beowulf* are Danish, and the poem was written in Old English and not Danish. Around 725, Vikings had invaded England, and they raped and pillaged the land. So why would anyone pass on such a tragic story about the Danes' invasion? The Danes treated their women differently from the rest of the ancient world and at the time women could fight and possess land (Olsen and Damico 57). Damico and Olsen in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* do a thorough job contextualizing this as I will explain in Chapter 2.2.

The dating of *Beowulf*, for how problematic it is, might be the key to explaining why the female heroes seem to assume such a central and active role. The Old English Poem of *Judith* was found alongside *Beowulf* in the Nowell Codex, the second of two manuscripts that belonged to Sir Robert Cotton. The poem can be dated back to 975 to circa 1025 and was bound in the volume Cotton MS Vitellius A XV. To this day, speculations arise over who wrote the poem.

Modern scholars believe Cynewulf to be the author, although the lack of his signature rune by the end of the poem. Cynewulf was one of the most prominent figures of Anglo-Saxon Poetry.

Unfortunately, due to a fire that damaged Cotton's collection in 1731, *Judith* remains incomplete at 348 lines long. The poem is one of the many retellings of Judith's story, another example of the same story but with notorious differences can be found in the apocryphal *Book of Judith*, later removed from the Bible. Another notorious retelling is the homily by Ælfric, who wanted to make Judith an example of the time. There are notorious differences between these versions, especially how Holofernes is portrayed in all three and how self-righteous Judith is shown to be in *The apocryphal Book of Judith*. Because of the many retellings, the reader is presented with an ambivalence of the character of Judith. The Old English Poem suggests she is a strong hero, while Ælfric's version presents her as a 'pious example of chastity' (Tracey-Anne Cooper, 169)

Throughout the many versions, the plot remains somewhat the same. Judith is the story of a beautiful widow who lives in the town of Bethulia, Israel, around the 6th century B.C. Her town has been taken over by the Assyrians, led by the general Holofernes described as a drunk man and a monster. Judith on the opposite is described as sinless because she is following God's will. One night, Holofernes invites her into his tent with the intent to rape her. Judith is seemingly going along with his plan, until she reveals her real motives to both Holofernes and the readers. She decapitates him and places his head into a bag. Thanks to her bravery, the Jewish can gain victory against the Assyrians. This story shows how Judith can overcome her adversities and lead her people to a triumphant victory over their monstrous enemies.

Because the Old English Poem *Judith* was found together with *Beowulf* in the *Nowell Codex* from Sir Cotton's library, I will be referring and using that version in this thesis and reference *the apocryphal Book of Judith* for contextualizing Hebrew women. Moreover, the translated version that I will be referring to when analyzing *Judith* is found in *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1450 an Anthology* edited by Treharne. Now let us give a look on who Judith really is, by taking into account her 'feminine ambivalent' character, and the historical background of the poem.

Chapter 1.2 A feminine, ambivalent, hero and historical background

Judith can be an enigma for some, after all there are two different accounts on who she really is and what her actions signified for the Hebrews. Let us take a look at how women were depicted and the reality they lived in, during the Viking raids and uncertainty of the Anglo-Saxons times.

Despite the different variations of the same story, the one thing that stays constant is the fact that Judith is a Hebrew woman. Deborah Levine Gera in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines* dedicates a chapter over the Jewish element in the text and contextualize them with ancient tradition. Everything from her name *Yehudit* meaning ‘Jewess’, indicate that she is indeed Hebrew and is portraying ‘an ideal Jewish heroine’ (39). The story takes place allegedly in Assyria, many researchers believe around the 7 and 6th century (40). This pious and Jewish character changes when the presented with the version of Judith found in the Nowell Codex. Judith in Late Anglo-Saxon England is powerful and a true hero. According to Cooper, ‘The Anglo-Saxons imbued Judith with both the qualities of military hero and chaste widow and used her narrative both as tropological message and allegorical type’ (171). This ambiguity of character or ambivalence of narrative should not come as a surprise when we date the Old English Poem of Judith around 975 - 1025, a turning point for the Anglo-Saxons of that time who had to face a second set of invasions by the Vikings around 980s. This time, the Anglo-Saxons decided to deal with the raiders by paying them, but no amount was ever enough, and according to Richards in *English Heritage Book of Viking Age England*, the tensions culminated with the St. Brice’s Day Massacre in 1002 in which many of the Danes were killed (56). Historians believed King Sweyn’s sister was one of the victims, this incident later on provoked king Sweyn to raid the Anglo-Saxons once again. Cooper concludes that ‘therefore, (Judith) needs to be thought of within the context of both the patristic background and the contemporary calamity’ (172). Her ambivalence can so be the result of the anonymous author to make Judith the hero that the contemporaries needed, with the metaphor of the ‘Assyrians’ being the ‘Vikings’ in the story.

To understand how Judith is portrayed as a woman, is important to take a look at the social status of women around the Viking second invasions in 980s. Because of the raids from the Danes, this period can be considered a fragile one for women. Alison Hudson in the article

Women in Anglo-Saxon England published by the British Library, discusses the earliest account of women's social status is explained by the Law-Code of King Æthelberht (ruler around 860–865) where we can see women described in eight different statuses, from slaves to free nobles. Nowadays historians have more knowledge of the power and social status of the highest ranked women, the nobles as Hudson explains in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. They did not wield always power, one example can be dated during the ruling of King Alfred. In the biography *Life of Alfred* written by Esser and translated by M. Lapidge and S. Keynes, one can read the following about the Saxons, 'The West Saxons do not allow a queen to sit beside the king, nor to be called a queen, but only the king's wife [because of] a certain obstinate and malevolent queen [from Mercia], who did everything she could against her lord and whole people¹ (Asser). This account shows that although there were high rank women, they were not allowed to be called 'queens' and they did not hold the same power the kings had. This view is challenged by scholars such as Anne L. Klinck who instead believe that women in Anglo-Saxon times were much better off than women in Anglo-Norman England. She writes in *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law* that:

Taken together, the law codes and legal documents present a clear picture of the status of women . . . The Anglo-Saxon period saw a gradual rise in women's status . . . by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period women were accorded greater responsibilities and were entitled to make certain important decisions (117).

Women with similar social status than men were considered roughly equals. This view is supported by law and codes found, although few, that shows that women held power and rights. This is also historically supported by King Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd, who will ascend to the throne at the death of her husband and rule for almost a decade (Damico 44). Æthelflæd was most known as Lady of the Mercians was the first born of King Alfred and Ealhswith, a member of the house of Mercia, making Æthelflæd half Mercian by birth. While Esser was writing her father's biography, she was already betrothed to Ealdorman Æthelred of Mercia. Although incredible, she was not an imminent predecessor of many future queens for the Anglo-Saxons. According to Hudson, her daughter Ælfwynn succeeded her at Æthelflæd's death but was

¹ Asser, *Life of Alfred*, chapter 13, translated by M. Lapidge and S. Keynes, Alfred the Great, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1983.

deposed by her uncle Edward. England unfortunately won't see another queen until the 16th century (Hudson).

Although interesting, the account of Æthelflæd makes more sense for a queen like Wealtheow, since their social status are alike, than Judith. The Hebrew Hero is a widow, and different right and laws applies to her. Because of her ambivalence in both a Hebrew woman and a Hebrew woman rewritten with an Anglo-Saxon cultural mentality in mind, I will explore only the latter because of the relevance of it for the thesis. In 'Widows' Rights in Anglo-Saxon Law' by Theodore John Rivers, the author explores what it means to be a widow and the rules and rights applied to them. The author claims that 'Widows attained more independence than any other marital class in Anglo Saxon England. For this reason, it can be said that the most favored women in England were . . . widows' (208). The independence the author claims lie in the ability to attain sexual protection. Women were under the guardianship and protection, *mundium*, of a man (father, husband, other men relatives) and were not legally responsible for most of their affairs, save for some. If a woman was victim of a crime, monetary compensation was given to her guardian (Rivers 209) Widows instead were under the protection of the church and state, as Rivers suggest 'a more distant type of protection' (209). So not only were widow viewed as any other women, but their protection was still there but a much more distant (and still intimidating) lay over them. Widows were not only under a laxer *mundium*, but their rights and inheritance were also defended (Rivers 210). This also explains the numerous references to Judith and God in the Old English Poem and how she is invested by the power of God to bring this mission to success.

Chapter 1.3 Climax scene: The decapitation of Holofernes

This section will focus on the decapitation of Judith's enemy, Holofernes, while doing some close reading of it as the climax scene and taking into account the way Judith is described (devoid of emotions). This analysis will be carried out by comparing Judith to Wealtheow, as well as by comparing the male character of Holofernes and the way men act in *Beowulf*.

The poetic feature, *kennings*, will also be analyzed to further understand how each individual character handles their climax scenes and to characterize further not only their behavior but the historical reasons behind it. Picking up on affect theory in a very recent article,

Barbara Schmitz in *Judith and Holofernes: An Analysis of the Emotions in the Killing Scene* the reason behind the lack of emotion in the killing of Holofernes. Judith is stoic while murdering him, while Holofernes is described much more and give insight to the reader inner's world. The author theorizes over the possibility that this is true is due to the idea of Old English heroes needing to control their emotion, and as I mentioned in my introduction, it is my belief this might stem from Plato who wrote about Socrates's death, describing his teacher as heroic about facing death and doing so with calm. According to Plato, Socrates demanded control over emotions. Of course, Roman culture continued this idea, and it gets passed along in literary texts.

Holofernes is feasting, celebrating seemingly a victory. He is getting drunk, 'Then Holofernes / the gold giving friend of his men, became joyous from the drinking.' (*Judith*, lines 21-22) and words like *enjoy themselves, treasures, laughed, ruler of warriors, arrogant* are used to describe him and his guests as those fully expressing themselves in ways very unlike Anglo Saxon heroic ethos found in Old English poetry. Beowulf and Hrothgar follow the *comitatus code*, and during the feast in the hall of men women are spoken highly of. When Wealtheow enters with her women, this is how she is described, 'and his queen with him / crossed the path to the mad-hall with a troop of women.'" (*Beowulf*, lines 922-924)

It is interesting how Wealtheow is not only a queen, but she enters the hall together with her husband, and the women following her are described with the military term 'troop'. Damico in *Beowulf's Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Complex* explains how this term is there to remind the reader that Wealtheow held equal importance to her husband (57). This passage is in stark contrast with the way Judith is described when entering the tent:

They stepped into the tumult / of the guest-hall where they found the wise Judith, / And then quickly / the warriors began to lead the / illustrious maiden to the lofty tent . . . / they quickly brought to bed the prudent woman . . . / Then the Saviour's / glorious handmaiden was very mindful / of how she could deprive of the terrible one / of life most easily (*Judith*, lines 39-76).

Judith is described as prudent, mindful, and wise. Wealtheow instead enters the hall with her own troop and is later described as adorned in gold: 'Then Wealtheow came forward / under a golden circlet' (*Beowulf* lines 1162-1163). Dressed as such, the queen appears even more

powerful and shining than ever. Entering with such clothing is proof that she is a real queen who has followed *comitatus code*.

Judith instead is forced to wear gold after Holofernes' command: 'he commanded that the /blessed maiden should be hastily fetched / to his bed, adorned with bracelets, / decorated with rings.'" (*Judith*, lines 35-37) Judith never arrive to the tent wearing gold but she is commanded to do so, in stark contrast with Wealtheow that arrives to the hall of men covered in it. The differences between the two scenes does not end there, the environments are completely different as well. Hrothgar's hall is beautiful, deserving to be called the hall of men: 'Tapestries shone, / adorned with gold along the walls, a number of wondrous sights / for each person who gazed on them' (*Beowulf*, lines 994-996). The *Beowulf* poet describe the tapestries, so beautiful that it was impossible not to look at them and appreciate its beauty. While very little is known of the tent where Holofernes' men are enjoying themselves, the anonymous poet describes the small tent in which Holofernes command his men to bring Judith in. It is beautiful, but only for his eyes to admire:

There was a beautiful
all-golden fly-net that the commander
had hung around the bed, so that the wicked one
the lord of warriors, could look through
on each of those sons of men who came in there,
but not one of the race of mankind could look on him (*Judith*, lines 46-51)

The men themselves appear to act completely different in Hrothgar's Hall and in Holofernes' tent. While Hrothgar's banquet and hall is described as adorned in gold, where the king gift Beowulf's with kind words and gifts:

They sat down on benches enjoying lory,
rejoiced at the feast; the resolute kinsmen,
Hrothgar and Hrothulf, graciously accepted
many a cup of mead
in the lofty hall. The inside of Heorot
was filled with friends; (*Beowulf*, lines 1013-1018)

Holofernes' men are the total opposite. The men are feasting, getting drunk and their cups are never empty:

proud men at the wine drinking, bold mail-coated warriors,
all his companion in misfortune. There, along the benches,
deep bowls were carried frequently; full cups and pitchers . . .
(Holofernes is) the terrible lord of heroes. (*Judith*, lines 16-21)

Holofernes is not only drunk, but described as a terrible lord of heroes. Going back to Holofernes's tent, the night develops and he is suddenly corrupted by evil. 'Then corrupted by evil, / he commanded that the blessed maiden should be hastily fetched / to his bed' (*Judith*, lines 34 – 36). Judith enters the scene, she is called *wise* although the reader won't understand why until later. Judith is escorted to Holofernes' tent, 'the warriors began to lead the / illustrious maiden to the lofty tent, / where the powerful man Holofernes, hateful to the savior / rested himself during the night' (*Judith*, lines 42-45). It is described that the bed the 'ruler of warriors' rested on is so private that nobody would be able to see him, unless Holofernes 'commanded one / of his very iniquitous men to come / nearer to him for secret consultation' (*Judith*, lines 52-54). This detail will have relevance when Judith decapitates the warrior. His intentions are clear, Holofernes intends to rape Judith: 'he intended to violate / the bright woman with defilement and with sin' (lines 59-58). Luckily, God does not approve: '(God) would not consent to that' (line 60). The situation appears grim for Judith, with Holofernes the literal '*ruler of warriors*' and with God not approving of the situation but not intervening directly either. But fortunately, Judith is not a common woman, she is referred in the poem as 'Savior's glorious handmaiden' (line 74) and as stated by the opening lines of *Judith*, she is protected by God himself: 'she readily found protection from the glorious Lord, . . . the Lord of creation / defended her against the greatest terror' (lines 3-4). In this case the glorious Lord is Holofernes, who is celebrating victories after victories, and Lord of Creation is God. By these lines alone, is clear that no matter what adversities will Holofernes throw on Judith's path, she is enlightened by God and thus will come out victorious. The climax is rising, the reader knows Judith is God's handmaiden, but they also know about Holofernes' strength. The tension keeps building up when the two of them are left alone, two counterparts of an ongoing war. A maiden and a lord, the inevitable consequences seem already decided as she walks over his bed. Finally, the climax scene finds its culmination

when she takes her chance. With resolution and void of any remorse or feelings that could get in her way, she grabs the sword and with an invocation to God, she decapitates Holofernes.

Then the Creator's maiden,
with her braided locks, took a sharp sword,
. . . she began to call the Guardian of heaven,
by name . . .
She seized the heathen man
securely by his hair, pulled him shamefully towards her . . .
she cut through half of his neck . . .
The courageous woman struck the
heathen hound energetically
another time so that his head rolled
forwards on the floor (lines 76 – 111).

The situation is dire, the words are carefully crafted with pathos (from the Greek word: *πάθος*, 'experience') in order to achieve the climax scene. Although both concepts of pathos and climax in literature are a challenging topic and constantly re-examined, scholars such as Braet aims to explain what pathos means in a literature sense. The author writes in *Ethos, pathos and logos in Aristotle's Rhetoric: A re-examination* that, 'The 'pathetic proof' or *pathos* depends upon 'putting the hearer into a certain frame of mind' (*ton akroaten diatheinai poos*) through the speech' (Braet 314). In this case, *pathos* is explained with an example of a jury. The lawyer invokes sympathetic feelings in the audience and the judge, to control the audience's decision: 'If . . .it can be shown that the defendant in a court-case is responsible for wrath-rousing things, then that is a compelling reason for the judges to feel anger toward him' (Braet 314). In the case of *Judith*, the jury is the audience who is listening to the story as their feelings rise to a climax just before Holofernes' beheading. According to Herrick Robert and Damon Lindsay T. in *Composition and Rhetoric for Schools*, *climax* as a literary device happens when the story has reached its turning point, and the action arrives at its peak (361). Galloway in *Imagining the literary in medieval English* also muses over another scholar Scholes' who compared the climax in narrative to a sexual act as 'intensification to the point of climax and consummation' (215). Braet and Galloway's sense of a climax as the height of the audience's emotion akin to sexual climax leads

us to see the Judith bedroom scene as multilayered in terms of the height of action and the height of feminine sexual power.

It is undeniable that the decapitation of Holofernes is when the action reaches its culmination. Judith grabs the sword, invoke God in a prayer as if asking for more strength and divine help, then pulls the sinful Holofernes close and with one chop she slices his neck, but it is not enough. The heroine struggle will not last longer because with the next strike, she manages to chop the head off. Judith is void of any feelings, except she is described as '*mindful*' about how she will kill Holofernes: '(she) was very mindful / of how she could deprive the terrible one / of life most easily, before the impure and / foul one awoke" (Lines 73-76). Instead of the female bed partner yielding herself to the male, as is expected in most stories, here it is not only denied but replaced with feminine power. Holofernes, symbolizing men, is expecting to experience a sexual climax, but instead he is decapitated. This decapitation and failed at receiving sexual climax have implication to Judith, as a woman in the poem, and reverse the sexual roles that we as readers expect to experience as well. Judith's sexual climax has a different outcome, she receives satisfaction by bringing her bloody revenge and by doing so, attaining peace for her people. The audience, the jury, is enraged at the height of this epic climax. They feel for Judith who has suffered and is in danger, as Holofernes' head rolls on the floor, the jury feel at peace akin to sexual pleasure. Justice is restored and the roles have been reversed.

All of these are actions used in great epic poems such as *The Iliad*, and their characters heroic nature is not even under discussion. It is universally accepted that Achilles is a *demi-god* and hero. He is the most prominent prince and warrior between the Achaeans, his people look up to him and depend on his victory a similarity he shares with Judith. Although she is not the most prominent warrior between her people, she is Lord's maiden, Lord had 'granted her request, since she always possessed true faith in the 'almighty' (line 6-7). Judith does not only assassinate the most dangerous man in the war, but she also leads the Hebrew men to victory: 'Hebrew men had shown violent sword-branding' (line 240). Then again: 'before the terrible force of the Israelites came down to them' (line 252).

Both Achilles and Judith contribute to make their respective communities result victorious because of divine intervention, Judith invoked God's himself while Achilles is

constantly aided by Zeus. Scholar Walter Petersen analyses the gods' intervention in the Iliad in *Divinities and Divine Intervention in the 'Iliad'* and discusses how Zeus intervenes in the battle between Achilles and Hector (Achilles's *climax* scene) in which Zeus intervenes in the battle and help Achilles strike the enemy down.

Scholar Schmitz discusses the reason Judith is stoic while facing her enemy. The scholar reveals that heroes void of emotions are a common tradition in epic poems, and it derives from a Greek concept that started with Socrates. When faced with his death, Socrates is not scared, and that trait is idolized by philosophers such as Plato (Schmitz 188). The lack of emotions is a hero's characteristic. Although Judith results as a stoic hero, readers are given insight in Holofernes' emotions. Schmitz analyses the antagonist as well, '(His) situation is characterized by great intensity . . . Led by his sexual emotions . . . he is not able to see the potential danger that could arise for himself' (184). The danger in question is the seemingly innocent damsel, Judith.

Judith on the other hand does not give readers too much insight into her thoughts, and the only rare glimpse of any feelings reside in her speech to God. Schmitz writes, 'the two prayers giving access to her inner world. The prayers are the only emotional expression' (187). The heroine has a goal to accomplish, emotions won't get in her way but as the maiden of God when she prays, she allows herself to be vulnerable. All these similarities to classic Greek heroes only enlighten how much Judith is a hero by her own means. While Achilles has superhuman strength and the gods by his side, Judith is the God's maiden and has intellect, a weapon she uses against the Assyrians who seemingly lack intellect. Godfrey writes in *Beowulf and Judith: Thematizing Decapitation in Old English Poetry* that, 'In contrast to Judith . . . her opponents are presented as men living without . . . God' (14). The Assyrians are drunk and filled with lust, two sins that God disapprove. Godfrey explains that, 'they are nonverbal: shouting, boisterous . . . no one is louder than Holofernes himself' (14). The drinking put them into a state of sleep and make them look as if they are dead (Godfrey 15) thus making God and Judith's plan much easier to carry on.

Chapter 1.4 Judith's Agency

This section will analyze and discuss Judith's agency in light of the previous close reading, as well as by taking into consideration previous findings done in the other section of the same chapters such as historical period, and how women were viewed.

Agency in literature means that a character acts upon a specific goal and contributes, pushes, and create the plot. Although debated, scholar Colin Campbell explores the definition of agency in *Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the 'Black Box' of Personal Agency* and distinguish two types of agency. The first type of agency is the 'ability to initiate and maintain a program of action while the second refers to an actor's ability to act independently of the constraining power of social structure' (1). Judith has shown the reader that she is able to carry on the decapitation, a plan she made herself since the poem says that God, 'granted her request' (line 6). Not only has she shown initiative, but she also shows the second type of agency, she fights against power of social structure by defeating the *ruler of warriors* while being a handmaid. Judith acts in her own means, she sees the Hebrew in need of help and she willingly enters the enemy's tent, knowing she could either be raped or save her people. This self-sacrifice is similar to the one Beowulf do when confronting Grendel and aiding Hrothgar, because of his *kinship* to the king. Judith shows a similar *kinship* to her own Lord. Her Lord's people are in danger, so she must sacrifice herself to aid them. In *Beowulf*, when Hrothgar is told that Beowulf arrived to his aid, he calls Beowulf and his men *kinsmen*, 'Be hasty, command that band of kinsmen / to come in all together to see me;' (*Beowulf*, lines 386-387). *Kinsmen* refers to people related by blood, a family member and it is usually referred to men. It can be discussed whether Judith is god's *kinsmen*, since *kinsmen* is a concept used in the Bible² but never mentioned when talking about Judith. Regardless, Judith acts like a kinsman would and avenger her Lord's people because she must. She demonstrated with her actions that not only she is similar to other epic heroes such as Beowulf and Achilles, but she also is an active character because she is proactive and pushes the plot forward. God helps her, but the same instance is seen in the battle between Achilles and Hector, and Achilles is clearly considered an active character because of his victory. By killing Holofernes, Judith has signed a

² "then he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead." Gen 31:23 Source: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/words/Kinsmen>
Source: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/words/Kinsmen>

victory for the Hebrew people and the demise of the Assyrians with the loss of their general. For Judith to be considered a passive character, she would be waiting for God to appear to her and aid her in the decapitation but instead she invokes God in her prayers and does not wait. She seeks guidance instead of passively receiving it, and prays to her lord the following words:

God of creation, Spirit of comfort,
Son of the Almighty, I want to beseech you
for your mercy on me in my time of need . . .
Give me, lord of heaven
victory and true belief so I might cut down this bestower of torment
with this sword. Grant me salvation (*Judith*, lines 83 – 88).

Judith does not use passive voice tenses, she uses imperative *give me*, *grant me* as if she is commanding her lord what she needs without pleading for it. She is empowered, and her speech as scholar Schmitz said provides a window into her vulnerable. In this vulnerable moment we see her character shine with determination. She demands a victory for God and ask for salvation because there is no second thoughts for her action. She must act now.

Judith is a woman who seeks vengeance and blood like a male hero would. She seemingly reverses the ideal woman stereotype by adopting violent male tendencies. In the introduction to *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* by Helen Damico, the author explores the role of women in *Beowulf*, and although this can only be applied to an extent to Judith herself (hence one is an apocryphal book and probably set few years before *Beowulf* takes place), it is still a relevant reference since the two poems were found bound in the same tome in Lord Cotton's library. Damico writes that the role of women in *Beowulf* is to create peace, either by marrying or by holding a speech such as Wealtheow does (Damico 250). A kinswoman should not avenge the death of a beloved one like Judith do but should mourn them like Hildeburh does. There are also sexual tones in the decapitation of Holofernes, but interestingly the male warrior parallels Grendel's dam. Damico continues by saying that, 'As in *Beowulf* a warrior battles a monster: the blessed maiden grapples with the 'drunken, vicious monster' she then grabs his hair and pulls him closer to her in a loving 'mocking gesture' (255). Judith and Holofernes battle is a fight between the masculine and feminine world, Damico writes that:

‘Holofernes’ impotence is unnatural in the male as the wife’s aggression is unnatural in the hero’ (255). Holofernes has become impotent (he is drunk and not capable of defending himself) which is unnatural for a man to be, while Judith shows an aggressive tone that a female should not possess. Their battle thus become filled with sexual undertones as the female-male dynamic is shifted, the sense of the receptive female and the efficacious male are reversed, and Judith is the one that takes active advantages of the other. This result in the male sex in a disadvantage.

Judith striking her enemy twice in the neck can also be read as an example of her passivity. Tracey-Anne Cooper in *The sword of Judith* believes that Judith is a passive instrument of God and a not so competent maiden, ‘she is more of a pious and passive instrument empowered and directed by God . . . someone struggling with a heavier inert body and unfamiliar weaponry as would be appropriate for a woman’ (172). Her struggle is what makes Judith an outstanding female character and not just an instrument, solely the act of what Judith does is unheard of for a woman: ‘Judith’s bloody deed is all the more courageous precisely because it is physically difficult and emotionally harrowing for a woman unused to combat’ (Cooper 173). Judith might not be at pair with her male counterparts, but she doesn’t need to be. The definition of agency is to push the boundaries, to direct the plot towards a direction and Judith does that with her action, resulting in her character as an active agent in the story and a proactive heroine.

The decapitation of Holofernes can also be argued as not enough of a reason for the Hebrew to win against the Assyrians. Christopher Fee in *Judith and the Rhetoric of Heroism in Anglo-Saxon England* argues that ‘it is no longer her action which ensures the victory of the Bethulians, but rather the reaction inspired by it.’ (1). This does not take away from her active role, and neither diminishes the comparison made with the male heroes. Achilles’ battle rises the morale of the Achaeans and that by itself is enough. The hero dies as well and will not see his people winning the long war. Christopher Fee also compare the old *Judith* with the vulgate version, where her character is shown as a true virgin hero and where the decapitation of Holofernes is undoubtedly seen as the reason for the Hebrew’s victory. Fee writes, ‘the poet diminished Judith’s role, it is true;’ (5). The scholar believes the poet of the old *Judith* to have manipulated her character in order to conform with the belief of the poet’s times.

Can Judith be considered an active character and a hero? If her victory is the motivation that the Hebrew need, it could signify that the poet voluntarily diminished her feminine role by showing a ferocious Judith, void of emotion and at the same time diminishes her victory to highlight the strength of the Hebrew male's power, 'the Old English poet centralizes Judith's role in her people's victory but felt he could only do this by masculinizing Judith and removing all importance from her femininity' (Fee 2). Although true, this can also symbolize a more nuanced character than other scholars might be willing to accept. The critics fail to appreciate 'the nuanced portrayal of Judith which places a female in a traditionally masculine setting without denigrating either' (Fee 3). Judith is a female hero; this femininity does not get in the way of the character's actions. She does not show any weakness when decapitating Holofernes and striking the enemy twice might have been a device to increase the climax of the scene similarly to the battle between Grendel's dam and Beowulf. Beowulf is attacked by the monster and dragged in the cave, in a desperate attempt at killing the beast Beowulf attacks it but does not manage to pierce the skin, so he must attack her again: 'Then the stranger found that the battle-lightning would not bite, harm her life' (*Beowulf*, lines 1509-1578)³ this device helps making the battle appear dangerous, it keeps reader scared and fearing for the hero's fate. Striking her enemy twice cannot be seen only as a weakness, but also as a common way to emphasize that the situation is not easy and requires the hero's mighty strength to win and can only highlight how powerful and important Judith's character is.

Chapter 2.1 Introduction to Wealtheow in The *Beowulf* Manuscript and the problem with her name

This chapter will focus on Wealtheow, the queen of the Danes and her significance in the poem *Beowulf*. Before the close analysis of her climax scene, the banquet in the *hall of men*, I will discuss the story regarding *The Beowulf Manuscript*, as well as bring light to Wealtheow's name and the problematic nature of its roots.

The Beowulf Manuscript remains a mystery to modern scholars. Bound together with *Judith* and the incomplete *Life of Saint Christopher*, *Wonders of the East* and *The Letter from Aristotle to Alexander*, none of these texts had a title. The *Beowulf Manuscript* together with

³ Donaldson, E. Talbot, and Nicholas Howe. *Beowulf*. Norton, 2002.

many more were damaged in the Sir Cotton's library fire, and some of the edges are forever lost. Scholars have analyzed and studied the two nineteenth century *Thorkelin A* and *B*, copies of *Beowulf* before the edges were lost. Thankfully to modern technologies, it is possible to read the burned edges of the Sir Cotton's copy and reclaim the once lost lines (Treharne 170). The poet of *Beowulf* is still unknown, most certainly whoever composed the text wrote of stories that were exchanged orally between people. In *The dramatic audience in Beowulf* by Lumiansky, the author is certain that *Beowulf's* audience was accustomed to the outcomes of each battle Beowulf fights: 'it is usually assumed that the events in the main plot of *Beowulf* . . . were well known to the poet's contemporaries' (545). The poet who wrote down *Beowulf* might have listened to the legends of the mythical warrior and decide to write down the story he heard.

Although Beowulf is the hero and protagonist of the story, many side characters shine within the plot. One of these characters is undoubtedly the queen of the Danes, Wealtheow. She is married to Hrothgar and together they have three children, Freawaru, Hroðmund and Hreðric. Her characters not only shine when holding a speech in the hall of men, but as Keane reveals in *Nasty women: Grendel's mother and Wealtheow as equal depiction of femininity*: 'challenges the misconceptions about women's status in the medieval period'(161). Wealtheow's strength resile in her ability to hold the speech instead of her husband, acting effectively as a peace weaver and by prioritizing her kingdom. She is first introduced in line 612, 'Wealtheow went forwards / Hrothgar's queen, mindful of courtesy: / gold-adorned, she greeted the men in the hall.' (*Beowulf*, lines 612-614). Her description truly fits a queen, covered in gold she stands out against the others. She is described as 'mindful of courtesy' implicating that she is aware of her duties as a queen, and she mindfully adhere into the role well. As Damico writes, Wealtheow is much more than a royal hostess but shows herself as a true equal to her king (5). The day after Grendel's defeat she: 'emerges from her bedchambers to proceed to the great hall not solely in the company of Hrothgar . . . but with 'mægþa hōse' 'troop of maidens, which it is implied, equals in excellence the *getrume miccle* 'large troop of warriors' (5). The fact that Wealtheow is even allowed to have her own *troop* further establishes her equal standing to her husband. As Damico writes: '(her) power and authority are in some measures comparable to Hrothgar's' (6).

Meanwhile another question arises, why is she called Wealtheow? Critics have come forward, refusing the idea that Wealtheow might be just more than a side character because of

the origin of her name and its implication. For years Wealtheow's name has been interpreted as 'foreign servant' or 'Welsh slave'. In *Wealhþeow' as a foreign slave: Some continental analogues*, Hill explores the controversial name and mentions it 'the most difficult onomastic problems in *Beowulf*' (106). The author continues by stating that a name as such is inappropriate for her role in the story, she is a queen and yet her name states her as a slave. Another scholar, Leonard Neidorf, in *Wealtheow and Her Name: Etymology, Characterization, and Textual Criticism*, joins the conversation over Wealtheow's name by sharing the latest reconsideration in interpreting her name: 'in light of recent advances in onomastic and textual scholarship' (1). In his research he concludes that the first part of Wealtheow's name, derives from *wala* (translated: 'chosen and beloved') and not from *walx* (translated: *foreigner*) as it was believed previously. Together with the last part of her name, *þewaz*, her name can now be translated as "chosen servant" and be in line with other names ending with *þewaz* with religious associations. Suddenly her name fits perfectly within the poem and revindicates her role as a powerful queen. The term 'chosen servant' might seem an argument leaning towards her passivity in the story since she is, after all, a servant. I do believe we must read this term as we did with Judith's 'maiden of god' in the previous chapter. Wealtheow and Judith shares the similarity that both their poets have linked them to God, as the chosen servants that were 'chosen' by the lord. If we are to read her name within this religious stance (which is not a surprise since *Beowulf* contains many references to God and Christianity) Wealtheow suddenly assumes a very similar position as Judith, since both were chosen by God to carry out a specific task. The term 'chosen servant' might also signify that Wealtheow is loyal to her husband (her 'lord') and is simply following the comitatus code similarly as Beowulf does within the poet. Who follow the comitatus code is often rewarded with glory and gold: "Then Hrothgar gave Beowulf Healfdene's word / a golden standard as a reward for victory, / a decorated battle-banner, a helmet and a corslet;" (lines 1020-1025). This passage shows how Beowulf is rewarded with gold because he followed the comitatus code and respected his lord. But Beowulf is not the only one who is rewarded for his deeds: 'furthermore, the lord of warriors gave treasures / an heirloom to each of those on the mead-benches / who undertook the sea-passage with Beowulf,' (lines 1050-1053). Beowulf's men are also rewarded for their bravery and for following Beowulf's in battle. Wealtheow is also following the comitatus code by adhering to her role as a wife and as queen and by holding her speech to honor her husband and her kins (as we will see further in this chapter); suddenly the

reason why Wealtheow's is covered in gold is clear. The term 'chosen servant' is by no means an example of passivity for the queen.

Chapter 2.2 Women in Anglo-Saxon society, Æthelflæd The Lady of the Mercians and the Valkyrie figure

A close analysis of Wealtheow would be incomplete without a look into Anglo-Saxon society, especially how women of high birth were treated and the rights they held. As such, a mention of the famous Lady of the Mercians must be paid just to understand the power Germanic queens held in their courts.

Little is known about Wealtheow within the chapter, except that she was a peace weaver. The same vagueness around her character is shared for all women during the Anglo-Saxon period. Damico in *New Readings on women in Old English literature* explains that documents were found before the Conquest, hinting those women could inherit and dispose of land as they wished. Not only that, but they could disown sons in 'favor of a female relative' (80). This implicates those women had much more power than it is believed and would also be useful to understand why the *Beowulf* poet placed Wealtheow with the importance task of speaking in *the hall of men*. The problem with women from the Anglo-Saxon society is that men wrote about them, and more often than not, they omitted them. In *Women in early medieval Europe, 400-1100*, Bitel explores the possibilities of the lack of women in history. She writes, 'more men were literate in Medieval Europe; hence men wrote most of what we know about medieval women' (5). Thus, the information we have about women have been filtered by men who decided who could be remembered, and who did not. The scholar continues by saying that: 'women . . . owned a lot of property' (7). Further proving that although small, women left intangibles traces in the past. They might not have epic poems dedicated to them, but women still lurked in these stories as side characters, 'female voices come to us sometimes in documents composed by the rare literate women herself, but more often, faintly, through the tales and rules of men' (Bitel 7). This seem to be the reality for Wealtheow, a noblewoman who shadows her husband and shines only during one speech. She is not the main character; she does not wield a sword but as a peace weaver the fate of her own tribes relies entirely on her.

The instance in which a peace weaver became a queen is only one, historically the Lady of the Mercians Æthelflæd was the first and last queen the Anglo-Saxons will see until the 16th century. Æthelflæd initially was supposed to bring peace but eventually managed to do more than that. Not only she ruled for over seven years, but ‘her influence helped to make possible the unification of England under kings of the West Saxons royal house’ (Damico 45). She is proof that although rare, becoming a queen at the death of a peace weaver’s husband was possible. This account shows just how much power Wealtheow holds in her own hands.

The power Wealtheow has in her own hands is more nuanced than brawl power, her own speech and words are an example of a *Valkyrie*. The reader might be uncertain of why it is so important for Wealtheow to be seen as such a mythological creature, the importance of it stands in the analysis of Wealtheow’s agency by the end of this chapter. If Wealtheow is truly symbolizing the *Valkyrie* as Damico explains in her findings, then her agency will be affected by it and might reveal the true nature of this mysterious queen.

Valkyrie are, as Damico explains in the chapter ‘*The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature*’, in Old Norse tradition of ambivalent nature;

two distinct, antagonistic perceptions of Valkyrie exist: they are seen as fierce, elemental beings and as benevolent guardians. This bifurcated vision may reflect a deeper understanding of the war-maids as representing differing concepts of the worship of Odinn and the nature of the afterlife (176).

Valkyrie are related to half human and half supernatural beings that Damico write stem from the word *idisi* in Old High German, and *ides* in Old English, Valkyrie act as ‘intermediaries’ between gods and humans (Damico 177). In Old English Literature, Damico mentions how the *Valkyrie*-figure has both ‘grim and benevolent aspects’ and are documented in the *Beowulf* codex. The *Beowulf* poet goes beyond the already known ‘grim battle-demons warriors’ (Damico 179) and describes Valkyrie as splendid creatures at the same time. We can see an example of that in Modthrytho, a queen who according to legends would punish whoever saw her in a way that the queen disapproved of. Modthrytho is considered by Damico ‘lady of peerless beauty, and she is ‘golden adorned’ (179) which are characteristics associated with Valkyrie-figures:

No brave one among her champions. Save the great lord. Dared to venture that – to gaze on her openly with his eyes: but he could reckon fetters of the slain would be ordained for him, woven by hand; quickly thereupon, after his seizure, the sword was appointed, so that the damascened blade was obliged to settle it, to make known the baleful death. Such is no queenly custom for a lady to perform, although she be peerless that a peace-weaver should exact the life of a beloved man because of a pretended injury (lines 1933-1943).

The reader must be thinking now, how can this have any significance to Wealtheow? After all, Wealtheow is not a bellicose woman, and all she does is hold a speech. The answer to this question lies in the speech itself, in how she appears when holding her speech. In Damico's words in *Beowulf's Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Complex*, 'her environment is the court' (68) not the battlefield. To understand how Wealtheow is an example of Valkyrie, we must analyze her speech in the hall of men – in other words, her climax scene.

Chapter 2.3 Climax scene: Wealtheow 's speech

Upon Wealtheow's entrance, it is clear that the *Beowulf* poet desired to make her character stand out to the reader. She is not only sitting beside her nephew and uncle, placing herself among the men, but she is also described as wearing gold:

Then Wealtheow came forward
under a golden circlet to where the two good men,
nephew and uncle sat ...
'Take this cup, my noble lord,
giver of treasure. Be joyful,
gold-giving friend of men, and speak to the Geats
with well-disposed words, as a man should do
(Lines 1162-1172)

She raises a golden cup and offers it to Beowulf, the reader might imagine her husband Hrothgar to be the one holding such an important speech, but she is the one covered in gold, and the focus of this scene. She also appears entering the hall of men accompanied by her maidens:

the guardian of the hoard of rings, stepped from the marriage-chamber
glorious with his great troop,
renowned for his good attributes, and his queen with him
crossed the path to the mead-hall with a troop of women.
(Lines 920-924)

This entrance might symbolize her nature as a *Valkyrie*. Wealtheow is not alone but accompanied by other women whom the poet describes as ‘troop of women’. Kathleen Self in *The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender* says that, ‘Most scholarship on Valkyries and shield-maidens categorizes them as women, as kinds of warrior women who are connected to other, rare warrior women, such as the maiden king (*meykongr*) and to other women who, in exceptional circumstances, take up arms to fight’ (143). Wealtheow does that, she moves in the hall of men covered in gold, followed by her fellow ‘troop of women’. Wealtheow appears calm, as she offers Beowulf a golden cup and cheers on his mighty victory. Damico also offers an insight into Wealtheow’s entrance, this time she focuses on the misconception that surrounds her entrance:

The primary function of the passage is to heighten the importance of Beowulf's deed...In line with Homeric and later medieval tradition, and with the poem's courtly and epic tone, Wealtheow 's attendants have been regarded by some commentators as fair damsels. In the courts of Germanic heroic literature, however, there were other types of maidens in attendance-equally fair, equally impressive (73).

This would explain why many scholars believe Wealtheow’s speech and entrance to be in line with the Homeric tradition, instead of Wealtheow’s figure being recognized as equal to her husband. It is important to keep in mind that Wealtheow’s is a northern queen, and her and her troop of women do not belong to a Mediterranean world like the princes in the Homeric epic poems do. As Damico points out, the word used to describe Wealtheow’s women is *mægþa hōse* literally translated as ‘troop of women’, and that is a word that has correlations to Germanic courts and not to Mediterranean ones, so labelling Wealtheow’s women and herself as ‘fair damsels’ would be historically wrong (Damico 73). Wealtheow’s relations to the *Valkyrie* has not only significance when she enters the hall, but with the word described for her women as

well. *Mægþ* although its root is masculine, it is often used in Old English poetry to indicate a sense of purity and virginity, or as Damico says, ‘of a woman who has to become chaste’ (73). One of the most famous *Valkyrie*’s characteristics is that they are pure. Wealtheow’s virginity cannot be questioned, since she had given birth to her heirs and sits next to her kins in the hall of men, but Damico explains that virginity and purity’s concepts might be different from the one we are accustomed to: ‘If not virgins in deed, they were steadfast in their duty until they became erotically attached to the hero. In Anglo-Saxon epic, the Christian warrior-maids Juliana and Judith are *mægþ* (as is the Virgin Mary’ (73). As we saw in chapter one, Judith is often described as a maiden although she was not a virgin, this seems to be the same for Wealtheow. The two are not virgins in their deeds, but pure of heart and strong to carry out what must be done (Judith must kill Holofernes and help her people, while Wealtheow must hold her speech and look out for her kins). Lastly, the word *hōs* has associations with military troops and with the Valkyrie figure. Since its etymology is still uncertain, many scholars have chimed in in what *hōs* really mean, some believe it might signify the word ‘swan’ while others believe the word to have a feminine root (Damico 75). Damico believes that the secret to understand *hōs* and its meaning lies in reading it together with *mægþ*.

A specialized sense of *hōs* as ‘swan’ or ‘military troop’ is untenable. Its employment in *Beowulf* at most contextually can only suggest a formal tension created by the juxtaposition of the female *mægþa hōse* with the male *getrume micle*, with the added implication that the queen's power in the court is equal to that of her husband's (74).

Regardless of its real root, the term places Wealtheow as an equal to her husband, and that might justify why is the queen herself that holds the speech and not her husband. But Wealtheow’s climax scene is not her entrance. Instead, it is when she cheers on Beowulf and she holds her speech, in which she asks Beowulf to look out for her family and subtly reminds him that her sons are the ones who will inherit the throne and not Beowulf. She places herself and family in a situation of power, and she is not scared to stand up for what she cares:

Wealtheow made a speech; she spoke before the company:
‘Enjoy this circlet, beloved young Beowulf,
and with luck, use this mail coat,

the people's treasure, and prosper well,
show yourself with strength, and be kind to my boys
with your advice. I shall remember your reward for this.
You have brought it about that you will be praised among men
near and far for ever,
even as widely as the sea, the home of the wind,
flows round the cliffs. Be fortunate for as long as you live,
prince. I wish well for you
a wealth of treasures. Be kind in the things you do
for my sons, joyful man.
Here, every warrior is true to the other,
kind in heart, loyal to their liege lord;
the thanes are united, the troop is fully prepared,
the noble warriors, having drunk to it, will do as I ask.
(lines 1215-1231)

A peculiar quote from Wealtheow's speech stand out: 'The noble warriors . . . will do as I ask' (line 1231). Wealtheow remind Beowulf that she is a queen, and as such her men will do exactly what she commands them to do. She says so after having reminded Beowulf that 'here, very warrior is true to the other, kind in heart, loyal to their liege lord' in other words, loyal to her and her husband and one day, her children as well. Her delivery is subtle and powerful at the same time.

We have seen how queens could not only act as peace weavers, but ascend to the throne. Although this has happened historically once with The Lady of the Mercians, one cannot help but wonder if such occurrence might have happened again but no accounts are found regarding it. After all, history was written by men. Who knows if the accounts we have received nowadays could hold a different story if they were to be written by women.

Chapter 2.4 Wealtheow's agency

This last section will discuss Wealtheow's agency, after having discussed in length her climax scene and the power her words held. From the nature of her name to the strong hold she

has on *the hall of men*, Wealtheow knows her rights in the hall and knows where to push Beowulf in order to obtain what she desired: making sure her children will not be overthrown by the heroic Beowulf.

Wealtheow's character was, in my opinion, a much harder character to analyze than Judith's. While Judith does take matter upon her hand and slay her enemy, Wealtheow never does. She has selfless intentions as in, she present a sense of stoicism over her emotions because she understands that she must look after her children welfare. Judith is an easier heroine to analyze also because she is clearly active in her own story and resembles characters we would see in recent novels or in a gory scene of a famous show of *Games of Thrones*. Wealtheow is instead, subtle, composed and very little is known about her. I was inclined in classifying her as a passive woman in her own story if I did not stumble on Damico's book *Beowulf's Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, that book changed my understanding of Germanic queens and Wealtheow completely. Because of my previous studies, it was clear that my understanding of Wealtheow stemmed from a wrong perception. I was regarding her as a Mediterranean queen, which of course defeats the purpose of this thesis. Wealtheow belongs to a Germanic court, she sits in the hall of men next to her children and husband and her attire is magnificent. Just by the clothing the reader assumes Wealtheow to be important. But gold is not the only thing that shines through this passage, but Wealtheow herself shines when she speaks to the hero. As a queen she kindly thanks him for his deeds and for helping her court get rid of Grendel, at the same time she admonishes him for not seeking throne within her people: 'the thanes are united, the troop is fully prepared, / the noble warriors, having drunk to it, will do as I ask.' (lines 1230-1231). The noble warriors have drunk from her hall of men, feasted at her banquet and as such they swear loyalty to her – the queen – and they will respond to her and her husband only. With such a simple line, I interpret this passage as Wealtheow affirming her power within the thanes and reminding Beowulf of his place. The threat is subtle, but still potent, that Beowulf must abide by her words or fear her men.

As Damico explains in her book, it is difficult to view Wealtheow as no more than a side character because she arises from Old Norse tradition. Undoubtedly, she is not the main protagonist, but her 'multifaceted personality' shines throughout her speech (Damico 179). As Damico says: 'The multiplicity and complexity of her functions and the dictional choices the

poet makes in describing and identifying her delineate a character who is an embodiment of interwoven ideas and images of some consequence' (179). Wealtheow shares common traits of a fair maiden and a strong *Valkyrie*, and it is a wonder that in such a short speech, she is able to convey so much of her character while still leaving much of herself a mystery. Although scholars have used the origin of her name as a 'slave' to explain her passivity, Damico and Hill argue that her name is related to something completely different. Her name derives from *wala* ('chosen and beloved'), thus arguing that her name has nothing to do with her passivity. Damico goes further and claims her name aligns with *oskmeyjar* (179) literally translated as 'chosen maids' who: 'welcome the *einherjar* to Valhalla, with cup or horn outstretched' (Damico 179). Wealtheow does exactly that by stretching a golden cup towards Beowulf, cheering on his deeds as the *Valkyrie* would do by welcoming the fallen warriors to Valhalla with a cup or with horns.

Wealtheow revendicates her position by taking part of a military victory in the hall of men, and she not only takes part in it, but also drinks with the others. The origin of her name, together with the golden dress and the troop of women who follow her in the hall, justify this character being active in her own femininity. As a woman she stands out for herself, reminds the reader who she is with her speech and protects her lineage from Beowulf if he ever desired the throne for himself. Her power lay also on what is not said, on her silence and lack of emotions. We have seen this happening with Judith, when the heroine reaches her climax, she is void of any emotions and carries on her duties. Wealtheow is delivering her speech without emotions. Ironically, she is trying to protect her children without using emotions, very different from Grendel's dam who seeks her vendetta and does so by doing violence. Wealtheow does not use violence, instead she talks. Talking without emotions when it comes to protect her own children requires agency and feminine power. Wealtheow knows how courts works, she is a queen and understands how political affairs are conducted. By acting distant and regal, she is able to achieve what needs to be achieved for her children. She is able to discern between her own desire and what's good for her children, 'the greater good'. Being able to be in such control of one's emotions and to see past her own desire requires heroic inaction. Both Wealtheow and Judith are lacking emotional display, and as Schmitz says about Judith, it is likely that these emotions are lacking purposely (Schmitz 185). Having said that, the purpose for this lack of emotions is a conjecture, and a mystery still left to solve. This queen is not the only one who will use her

words in order to obtain what she desires, there is another woman who does the same but in a slightly different manner: The wife in *The Wife's Lament* who I shall analyze in the next chapter.

Chapter 3.1 Introduction to The Wife's Lament

The character in *The Wife's Lament* (who I shall refer to as the wife to avoid sounding too redundant) is the focus on this upcoming chapter. In this section I will introduce the wife by looking at the collections the elegy belongs to, as well as doing some close reading of the elegy to better define the wife herself. While the Riddle 59 is translated and taken from Holland's book *The Exeter Book Riddles*, the elegy itself, *The Wife's Lament's*, translation I will be using is the one translated by Elaine Treharne in *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1450 An Anthology*, for a sense of continuity since I have been doing close analysis on the other poems translated by the same scholar.

Differently from *Beowulf* and *Judith*, *The Wife's Lament* is found not in the *Beowulf Manuscript* but in the *Exeter Book* without a title, following Riddle 59. Riddle 59 desires for the reader to guess the object the author is describing in form of riddle. Following, is the text of the Riddle itself translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland in *The Exeter Book Riddles*:

I watched men, wise in their minds,
and in their hearts serene, gaze at a golden
ring in the hall. God the saviour
has prayed for peace abounding for each guest
who turns the ring; then that ring spoke
a word to the family, it named the guardian
of men who do good. Dumb as it was,
it clearly raised the image of the Maker
before the minds and eyes of anyone able
to understand the meaning of the gold
and the wounds of the Lord, and do as the wounds
of the ring ordained. If a man is unbaptized,
neither his prayer nor his spirit
can enter the kingdom of God,

the castle of heaven. Let him who will
explain how the wounds of this wondrous ring
spoke to men when it was turned in the hall
and passed through proud retainers' hands.

(81)

The placement for this riddle just before *The Wife's Lament* might be the way the medieval audience was supposed to read the following elegy. The Riddle deals with kingdoms, gods and lords and a ring. Could this ring be a hint to the wife? Especially the last lines of the riddle sound almost like a threat: 'If a man is unbaptized, neither his prayer nor his spirit can enter the kingdom of God' (lines 12-13). If a man is not baptized, they won't be allowed in heaven, this type of threat reads very similar to the words the wife will use soon in her climax scene. The riddle itself sounds like an elegy, with a dark tone where the riddle itself threatens that whoever does not believe in God won't enter the heaven kingdom. This themes of deaths, rings (marriage), and thrones (the Wife's husband is a lord) might be setting the tone for the next read: *The Wife's Lament*.

Understanding this elegy is not easy. Still to this day scholars disagree on the interpretation of this elegy (Treharne 86). Some scholars such as Craig Williamson has read this first-person elegy as a riddle of a woman longing for Christ, or even as a speaking sword (Williamson 155). Modern scholars believe it to be a woman longing for her lord who has abandoned her. This last take on the elegy is how I will be analyzing it. What's peculiar about this elegy is that the speaker is unaware of why her lord has abandoned her, and she finds consolations in her own words.

Where I can only weep about my exile,
about many hardships; because of this I cannot ever
rest from the sadness of my heart,
or from all the longing which takes hold of me in this life (Lines 38 – 41).

These few lines hints towards sadness and distress, by using words such as 'weep' and 'sadness' the woman is setting the tone for the elegy. At the same time, she finds comfort in words such as

‘rest’ and ‘longing’, where she describes as this pain holding her life still, while she longs for the return of her husband and wishes to put to rest her sadness.

Despite that, it would not be surprising if readers find it difficult to see the wife as an active heroine. From these few lines alone, she is found weeping about her situation, and she indeed states that weeping is the only thing she can do, ‘I can only weep about my exile’ (line 37) suggesting that there is no resolute or willingness to resolve her situation. The debate on whether the wife is active, or passive is lengthy, two scholars in this regard stood out the most to me during this thesis: Renoir and Barry Ruth Straus. These two scholars have diverging opinions regarding the passivity of the wife. While Strauss believes that the wife might seem passive, the scholar believes that her active agency is based on this apparent passivity. Renoir tends instead to believe that the wife expresses both a mixture of passivity and activity with the first overcoming unfortunately the latter. Renoir in *A Reading Context For The Wife’s Lament* divides the elegy in parts, which I will be doing as well in order to exemplify this complicated text. In the first five lines the reader gets acquainted with the speaker’s suffering, and the, ‘Intention to tell the story of her misery’ (Renoir 237).

I relate this very mournful riddle about myself,
about my own journey. I am able to relate
those miseries that I endured since I grew up,
of new and old ones, never more than now (*The Wife’s Lament*, lines 1-5).

The wife mentions a mournful riddle, about her own very self and her sorrowful journey, she explains that it is thankful to this riddle that she is able to endure so much pain, both past and present miseries. With this introduction, the reader understands the main theme of this elegy, where words such as ‘mournful’, ‘miseries’ and ‘endured’ are present within the first five lines. Renoir locates the second part as the next thirty-six lines, where the speaker explains what led to her suffering: her lord left her.

First my lord went away from the people
over the tossing waves . . .
my cruel lord commanded me to be taken here.
I possessed few dears in this region,

loyal friends. Because of that my mind is mournful
(lines 6 -17).

The wife recalls how she and her husband parted ways, the sorrow it brought her since she had nobody dear to her in this land. His *kin* began to create problems between the wife and husband, hoping to separate them further: “The kinsmen of the man began to think, / through secret consideration, that they would separate us” (Lines 11-12). In the last part of the elegy, the wife speaks about her exile in the cave:

While I walk alone at dawn
under the oak tree through these earth-dwellings.
There I must sit the summer-long day,
where I can only weep about my exile,
about many hardships because of this I cannot ever
rest from the sadness of my heart
(Lines 35-40)

The wife explains that she is forced to live in a cave, walk alone at dawn during the long summers and claims to feel restless from the pain she has in her heart. The wife says that she walks alone at dawn and does so ‘under the oak tree through these earth-dwellings.’ Peculiar is the use of a singular noun when speaking of the oak tree. Why is she walking under only one tree? It seems as if the wife is circumambulating around this one tree, maybe to suggest that she finds that tree sacred. This might also suggest a sort of worship of this one tree as we have seen already in the past with paganism with the arrival of Anglo-Viking in England. It is reported by the scholar Thomas H. Ohlreg in *The Pagan Iconography of Cristian Ideas: Tree lore in Anglo-Viking England* that because of the Vikings’ invasions, Anglo-Scandinavians started practicing forms of paganism in their native lands, among others the pagan tree cults (Ohlgren 145). One of the accounts used by Ohlreg to prove his theory is the story of two homilies on the life of St. Martin Tours in which the saint wants to cut down a tree, but pagan worshippers won’t let him and: ‘To disprove the power of the Christian God, one of the heathens proposes that Martin sit under the path of the tree while the heathens cut it down’ (147). Back to *The Wife’s Lament*, the wife shows some similarities to this pagan worshipping of trees, she speaks of having to sit there

all summer, as if she is forced. The wife says: 'There I must sit the summer-long day' (line 37) why does she say that? is she trying to protect the tree the same way the pagans did at Martin's threats of cutting it down? Is she walking at night to idolize the trees, because it is a pagan practice and she is not able to do so during the day, because her worshipping is an erethic act?

The presence of the oak tree left me wonder of its significance. Why did the wife speak of an oak tree, and not another tree? The explanation might lay in the fact that this tree bears sacred fruits. Cusack wrote in *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* that Fintain mac Bochra (a survivor of the Great Flood) was asked to define the limits of the domain of Tara in Ireland. When he answered, he was then asked to explain where his extended knowledge came from and Fintain explained that he was visited by a supernatural being that carried a branch with three fruits: nuts, apples and acorns (Cusack, 81). Cusack further explains that these three fruits are known to be growing in one oak tree: 'Oak of Moone (*Eo Mugna*)' (81). So, the mention of the oak tree might be a hint that the wife was worshipping it, and a further understanding on why she must walk during the dark.

The wife's intentions remain a mystery but beyond her meanings, her speech is prevalent with activity and passivity acts from walking alone at night: 'While I walk alone at dawn' to having to sit beneath the oak tree in the summer: 'There I must sit the summer-long day', the wife never fails to present herself as such a contradicting character. She weeps, but she walks at night around this oak tree, she must sit there all along the summer and does not mention other seasons beyond that, she talks about how she can never find rest 'about many hardships because of this I cannot ever / rest from the sadness of my heart' but also claimed before that she would sit in the summer day long. Or maybe, her words are a proof that she is fighting against her own sadness? She keeps waking up every day, despite being abandoned by the man she loved, and she keeps finding meaning in her days despite the pain. If we were to read the same lines with this new meaning in mind, the sad woman described by Renoir start changing and shaping into a much more powerful one.

We will be able to read more into her agency as we discuss the last twelve lines are, among scholars, the most contested ones. As the reader might have already guessed, they are part of her climax scene.

Chapter 3.2 The Wife's Catch-22: Medieval Self-Elegy and Christian Charity

It has been mentioned that the poem is more so of an elegy, this chapter will look into Anglo-Saxons' elegies as well as works by Boethius to further understand the grief tone in *The Wife's Lament*.

It does not come as a surprise that the overall tone of this poem is mournful. Within the very first line, the speaker wants the reader to understand what they would be dealing with for the remaining of the poem, 'I can only weep about my exile' (line 1). While reading this first line, the feeling I gathered was of absolute passivity. Upon analysis, I wonder if it is the very first line at fault here, where the speaker uses the phrase *only weep*, where *only* gives the reader a sense of finality. It would be easy to fault the wife, after all she is the speaker, and she has told us that all she can do is weep. But can the speaker be at fault for her passivity when the genre of this poem is an elegy? Would it be fair to equal her agency as passive only because of the poem's nature? This ambivalence or schizophrenic relationship with old traditions and new Christian concepts is seen in many different Old English texts, such as *Beowulf* with the relation of Grendel to Cain: 'Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain' (lines 148-149). In this example we see how Grendel is related to a Biblical Figure to explain the root of evil in the monster (a Christian concept) tied together with a supernatural element (pagan concept). This ambivalence must be taken into account when reading an elegy such as *The Wife's Lament*, if we are to understand its complex characters and themes.

Another difficulty in reading the wife might be that this thesis aims to discuss it in light of other poems such as *Judith* and *Beowulf*. Both are epic poems, where heroes are bound by their *kin*, where lords and *wyrd* play an active part in the climax of their heroes and where entire nations are at stake. In other words, if the hero dies before completing their task, they will fail their people as well. An elegy is not quite similar to an epic poem, there is not epic grandiosity, no nations are at stake.

Elegy has changed from the medieval times to today modern ones, so to understand what kind of elegy *The Wife's Lament* belongs to, it is important to date this poem. Elaine Treharne in *Old and Medieval English* place the poem around the 10th century AD, placing the poem around

the late Anglo-Saxon period. Once the historical period was identified, I relied on the article *In The Consolations of Philosophy: Later Medieval Elegy* by Jamie C. Fumo, to understand the features of a late medieval elegy. Fumo writes that ‘Elegy as a ‘pure’ or self-articulated form did not exist in medieval England;’ (21). Instead of having one pure form of elegy, we find many different ones. Medieval elegy is used, among others, as a ‘self-reflected’ moment in which the speaker mourns, as seen in the first lines of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*:

“Boethius turns to the composition of Ovidian-style exile poetry in elegiacs to soothe himself of sorrow: ‘*Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda camenae | Et veris elegi fletibus ora rigant*’ (‘See how the Muses grief-torn bid me write, | And with unfeigned tears these elegies drench my face’; Boethius 1973, 1 m.1.3–4)
(Fumo, 20)

These lines are very similar to the ones spoken by the wife, “where I can only weep about my exile, about many hardships because of this I cannot ever rest from the sadness of my heart) (lines 38-40). Both Boethius and the wife are doing what Fumo calls, ‘a self-elegy’, which is an elegy that is inspired by the loss of someone: ‘Elegy inspired by the loss of another person is reframed as self-elegy’ (Fumo 21) and as the writer suggest, these elegies were mostly composed in the late-medieval England. That is not to say that Boethius was from England himself, indeed one can easily (and rightfully) question how Boethius’ writing found its way to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Boethius was a roman senator and philosopher who lived around the 6th century, a time that saw the collapse of the Roman Empire. In a world so divided, Boethius wrote from a prison his most known work yet, *Consolations of Philosophy* where he imagined himself having a conversation with philosophy itself. This work found its way to monasteries in England and found its success among monks and abbots alike. Like it was discussed in the introduction of this thesis, translating, and copying of old Latin texts was very common.

In the case of *The Wife’s lament*, the tone of the elegy is sad because the wife has lost her husband, and now she is forced to live in a country she does not know well, with his kinsmen trying to create ill between the two of them. As the next chapter will explicate, the self-elegy must not be seen as a sign of weakness, but as merely the device in which the poet wants the reader to understand her situation. However, since this thesis examines feminine agency, the

following sections consider types of agency in terms of character intent and motivation, from self-oriented to intending harm to concern for others and self-sacrifice. The next section will dive into a deep analysis of the climax scene of the wife: the curse.

Chapter 3.3 Climax scene: The curse

The young man may always be sad in mind,
hard-hearted in thought just as he must have
a happy appearance despite the grief in his breast
of a multitude of perpetual sorrows, whether it is that all his
joy in the world is at his own disposal, or whether far and wide
he is outlawed in a distant country, so that my beloved sits
under a rocky cliffs assaulted by a storm,
a lord sad at heart, surrounded by water
in a dismal hall. My beloved suffers
much mental torment; he remembers too often
a more joyful dwelling. It is misery for those who, longing,
have to wait for a loved one.

(Lines 42 – 53)

These lines are the most contested ones among scholars. There are many ways scholars have interpreted this, as a passive woman refusing to do anything else but weep about her situation, to others claiming that the wife placed a curse as she entered the cave. Renoir does not believe one theory or another, but rather he focuses on the elements that stands out in the elegy: ‘The speaker is an unhappy woman,’ (Renoir 238). Indeed, from the excerpt presented in this thesis, the wife weeps, walks alone, and is restless from the pain in her heart, ‘I cannot ever rest from the sadness of my heart’ (Lines 39-49). Also in these last lines, the overall theme is a sad one with phrases such as ‘grief’, ‘perpetual sorrows’, ‘sad at heart’ just to name a few. Another feature that comes to mind is that the speaker’s sorrow is caused by her man leaving her behind: ‘First my lord went away from the people’ (line 6). The wife’s sorrow is caused by her lord suddenly disappearing, leaving her in a foreign land where she knows nobody: ‘I possessed few dears in this region, loyal friends. Because of that my mind is mournful’ (Lines 16-17). Renoir compares ultimately

the wife to Freawaru and Hilderburh, two characters he recalls as ‘*geomuru ides*’ or with his own translation: ‘sad ladies’ who can’t help but mourn over their situations and tragedies, Renoir recognizes a woman who weeps and not much can she do about her situation (Renoir 231). His review leans towards a passive agency more than an active one, although he recognizes few instances where an active agency can be visualized it is not enough to warrant her as an active character (236). Indeed, the wife does seem to be rather fixed in a passive state with lines such as, ‘He commanded me to dwell in the wood’s grove under an oak tree in the earth cave’ (lines 27-28). She lets the reader know how she must inhabit the cave under the oak tree, she does not say for how long but only that her lord had commanded her to do so. Words such as ‘commanded’ do remind readers of a sense of passivity in the wife, usually someone who is commanded to do something would not be seen as an equal but rather, someone with a lower status. But the lines 27 and 28 are not the only one where the oak tree is mentioned, as we have seen before this happens also in line 35-36: ‘while I walk alone at dawn / under the oak tree through these earth-dwellings’. The wife seems to indicate that even when she is able to walk away from the cave, during the dark, it is still around the oak tree. This interpretation insinuates that she has no right to leave, no willingness either to do so because leaving the oak tree means disobeying her lord, and she cannot bring herself to do so.

Strauss has a different approach than Renoir. In *Women’s Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in ‘The Wife’s Lament*, Strauss admits that although the, ‘apparent passivity is surely there’ (268). The wife is much more than a passive character, her agency stems from the fact that she speaks. Strauss divides the poem as well, interestingly the division is slightly diverse from Renoir’s. The author describes the last twelve lines, as a ‘gnomic passage or curse’ (Strauss 270). This interpretation makes sense if we are to look at the words the speaker uses in these few lines. This line in particular reads, ‘The young man may always be sad in mind’ (line 42). Why did the author use such words? Strauss believes this is a curse, although the author is not sure if this curse is uttered to one or more men (276). Strauss reasoning lies also behind Grammar, according to the author the use of subjective has been linked by other theorist as a supportive thesis for the gnomic wisdom and the curse, although Strauss do not delve in how this subjective suggest the curse’s element.

Grammar aside, what makes this theory so interesting is how the speaker's last lines change the entire theme of the poem. If Strauss's theory is true, the tone of the entire elegy would change dramatically. The speaker would no longer be a 'sad woman' as Renoir said, but a woman who seeks to change her situation and does so by uttering a curse. Strauss says the following about the curse, 'Cursing, on the other hand, expresses the speaker's wish or desire. The speaker who curses tells the listener how she wants things to be; she is ordering the world to correspond to her words' (276). In other words, the woman is not just sad but is describing her situation, and it is in the last few lines that she utters how she wishes things would be. She wishes the same fate to the men who did this to her:

My beloved suffers
much mental torment; he remembers too often
a more joyful dwelling. It is misery for those who, longing,
have to wait for a loved one (Lines 50 – 53).

She wishes the man who gave her grief would also experience the same misery. Strauss also describes this type of uttering as a wish for the men to experience the same fate: 'by uttering a curse, she creates in the minds of her listeners the same fate she has suffered for the very males who have been the cause of her experiences' (Strauss 278).

The wife's strength does not rely in male aggression, or 'masculine strength' as Strauss says, similar to the strength showed by the strong Judith, who avenges her people by decapitating Holofernes (with masculine strength); the wife displays according to Strauss a more feminine strength, in a society that Strauss recalls as patriarchal the wife does not weep but avenges her own self in uttering the curse (Strauss 281). The speaker is not merely crying, but actively avenging her own self by uttering a deadly curse.

Chapter 3.4 The Wife's Lament's agency: Emotional Stoicism

This final section will take an overview of the climax scene to analyze and understand whether the wife's agency is active, passive or neither of the two. Let us look at the significance of the curse itself. If the speaker is indeed uttering a curse, how can we deem her a passive character in her own elegy? The wife's does not hold a speech in the *hall of men*, she is not a

queen nor a damsel following her Lord's will to save her own country. She is not selfless, but rather she is selfish. While Judith places her own safety aside for saving her people by entering Holofernes's tent, and while Wealtheow holds a speech to Beowulf and remind him that her children are the ones after the throne and looks after her family, the wife looks only after herself. In the elegy, it is evident, by the long self-pitied reflections such as 'I can only weep about my exile,' the speaker makes sure the reader is aware that she is indeed miserable.

Strauss argues that although her words are, indeed, just words, these are enough of an active action: 'Linguists and philosophers of language have shown us how speech is action' (268). Strauss also recalls the idea of speech theory by J. L. Austin based on the idea that speaking is an active action. Aside from speaking, she is also cursing her enemies. Her feminine strength relies on revindicating herself, just for herself. This speaker does not need any ulterior motives, she does not do this for her husband but for herself. She recalls how his departure hurt her and how it affected her

While I walk alone at dawn
under the oak tree through these earth-dwellings.
There I must sit the summer-long day,
where I can only weep about my exile,
(Lines 35 – 38).

She now must walk alone in the darkness; she uses a modal auxiliary verb such as 'must' to indicate something she has to do because she has no other choice. The fact that she is cursing her enemies for herself is a feminine revindication, innovative for the Late Medieval times. In *Women in the Middle Ages* by Mary Haiden, it is described what life was for a girl in England around the Middle Ages. There, girls were kept at home until they reached 15 years of age, then they were sent to a richer friend of theirs to learn embroider. These were luckier girls, because others were given away in contracted marriages as child brides as young as three years old. (344) It was in her house where a woman could shine, and a married woman held much more rights than an unmarried one (245). While there is still much uncertainty regarding women and the rights they held, social and marital status marked the differences on how a woman was treated and viewed by her society. A woman like the wife and Judith held different rights than a peace

weaver like Wealtheow, whose betrothal had a much bigger emphasis since it was meant to bring peace.

We cannot forget that the speaker has just lost her husband, she does not know if he will be back or when. All she knows is her sorrow, which she describes plenty, and her words which are the only consolation she has in this own exile. She wiles and curses, hoping as much sorrow she is feeling onto the people who crossed hers. In the world of literature, scholars cannot deny the power her words, and words in general, hold.

Her agency does not show a lack of emotions such as Judith and Wealtheow's climax scenes did, but rather a control over her grief. A sort of emotional stoicism, an oxymoron which in my opinion summarize her character perfectly. She is neither extremely active in her climax scene, nor passive. She shows emotions but also control over them, she is a real complex character who is capable of showing contradicting qualities. One moment she is cultivating her powerful inaction by stating that 'I can only weep about my exile' (line 38) and in another she is casting a curse: 'The young man may always be sad in mind' (line 42). Understanding the meaning behind the curse is up to interpretation and most often than not, scholars will have diverging opinions over the wife's action and inaction. Her words present both passive and aggressive behavior by wishing a similar fate to others as the one she suffers, and then as she speaks, she comes to the realization that maybe she is not the only one who has suffered during this exile, because after all 'My beloved suffers / much mental torment; he remembers too often / a more joyful dwelling' (lines 50-52). Her husband who has left must have been missing his home, a much better dwelling, and is probably as tormented as the wife is. She concludes her curse by uttering the words, 'It is misery for those who, longing, / have to wait for a loved one' (line 52-53). These last two lines she seems to still be in love with her husband, her words make me believe that she wishes to reconcile but at the same time her rage take the best of her.

This interpretation is personal, and many might have contradicting ideas over the meaning of her words, but I do believe that this is a fitting case for the wife whose entire character is filled with contradiction and oxymorons. She is neither particularly active nor inactive, but a mixture of both. She is a much more perplexing character than Judith and Wealtheow and because of her different and mysterious nature, this chapter focused on making

this contradiction transpire. In the end, *The Wife's Lament* proves to be an enigma as much as the riddles that precedes it in the Exeter books.

Chapter 4.1 The importance of other women

This chapter is dedicated to other women who, because of the limit of this thesis, could not be dedicated a lengthy chapter but are still important in drawing a worthy conclusion for the debate of passive and active agency. Freawaru, Hildeburh and Grendel's mother are often regarded as sad women, often their femininity blurs into masculinity (especially when looking at Grendel's dam) but nonetheless they are regarded as female. Their names have been mentioned before in this thesis, sometimes to draw parallels between Wealtheow and more unfortunate peace weavers, sometimes to prove how aggression is present in both females and males but is subtly different (Grendel's dam and Judith for example). In this chapter, I will explore each of these three women briefly, to introduce and hopefully start a conversation with these noteworthy characters whose sole existence I have to thank for the nature of this thesis. Without them, comparisons could have not been made, and the conversation result could have become stale. The reason for this chapter is to bring awareness to other characters such as Freawaru, Hildeburh and Grendel's dam, who in my opinion share similar vengeance, marital status and fate as the other three female characters this thesis was based on. This further analysis is made to extend the conversation over passive and active agency and to not limit it to only three characters. Freawaru, Hildeburh and Grendel's dam do not only share similarities with the other three women, but differences that are worth be mentioned for reasons that will find further discussions in the upcoming subchapters.

Chapter 4.2 Grendel's dam: A lady and a warrior

Grendel's dam might not fit with the previous three women whose thesis is dedicated to, but she shares a lot of similarities with them as well. This section will be a short dive into her character of a woman, a monster and a mother together with her *kin* to Cain and if this *kin* is at fault for her own blood thirst and lack of control of her emotions.

A mother and a monster, Grendel's dam is powerful and seeks vengeance for her diseased son. She fights Beowulf, and their fight results in one of the most triumphant battles in

heroic poems. Her battle prowess is not what fascinates scholars such as Jane Chance, instead it is her duality: a woman and a monster, feminine and masculine violence combined into one problematic character. Grendel's dam channels her femininity and sexuality into action like other Old English females did, but it manifests as diabolical strategy to lure Beowulf into the mire, thereby accomplishing vengeance. Jane Chance in her chapter '*The Problem of Grendel's Dam*', reveals that one key to understanding this character is to identify what type of monsters Beowulf must deal with before and after her (Chance 248). Grendel and the dragon 'have been interpreted as monstrous projections of flaws in Germanic civilization' (248). Stoicism, keeping emotions at bay, is a quality that Grendel does not possess. He lets his jealousy prevail his good sense and consequentially this emotion brings him to attack Hrothgar's Hall as we can see in the *Beowulf* translation in prose by Donaldson, Talbot, and Howe: Then the fierce spirit painfully endured hardship for a time, he who dwelt in the darkness, for every day he heard loud mirth in the hall; ... There he spoke who could relate the beginning of men far back in time, said that the Almighty made earth, ... Thus, these warriors lived in joy, blessed, until one began to do evil deeds, a hellish enemy. The grim spirit was called Grendel, known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness. Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain. (lines 84 – 149)

This instigates Grendel to become jealous of Hrothgar's Hall and to seek vengeance. He is not happy to hear the men feast every night, to listen to the stories of how the Almighty made Earth, he wants their joy but knows he cannot achieve it.

Grendel and his dam are both kin of Cain and because of that, they are monsters who cannot enter the hall of men. Cain is a character found in the Bible, who let his jealousy take the best of him and murders his brother Abel because God favored him. This blood feud, an eye for an eye is rooted in the Germanic tradition and we have seen examples of this throughout the thesis: Judith murders Holofernes because he occupied her land and killed her people, the wife cast a curse because she has been abandoned, Wealthew reminds Beowulf his place in the hall of men. The only difference between these vengeance and Cain's one is that Cain murdered his own brother, the others did not. We see this in the act of peace weaving, when women would be married to other tribes to bring peace among two different factions. Peace wavers was created for a sense of security, to safely bring peace among people who would otherwise do war. Cain and

his kin are different, they do not believe in keeping peace and they would easily kill their own kin if they let emotions take control over them. In other words, they lack stoicism. Cain killing of Abel does not go unnoticed, and when God finds out he cannot forgive Cain but rather condemn him and his children. According to the translation by King James Version in 1611, God's words are translated as the following: "When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth" (*Bible*, Gen. 4.4). By condemning his children, God is punishing Grendel's dam as well.

On the other hand, the dragon embodies greed. The creature is described by Jane Chance as a greedy king, who decides to attack Beowulf's people after he loses a cup:

Beneath lay a path unknown to men. By this there went inside a certain man who made his way near to the heathen hoard; his hand took a cup, large, a shining treasure. The dragon did not afterwards conceal it though in his sleep he was tricked by the craft of the thief. That the people discovered, the neighboring folk—that he was swollen with rage. (lines 2209-2274)

The dragon takes its own rage on the poor neighboring folk, whose village got destroyed because of the dragon's rage and greed. So, the question comes naturally: what does Grendel's dam symbolize? According to Jane Chance, Grendel's dam is the embodiment of a "lady monster" as we have previously seen being the translation of *wīf unhyre*, but she also inverts the roles of mother, lady, and queen (Chance 249).

While the other examples of women in *Beowulf* are mainly of peacemakers, Grendel's Dam is a mother seeking vengeance for her dead son. Grendel's Dam can be compared to Judith, who also seeks vengeance but while the first miserably fails, the second succeeds in her mission. And it could be said that Judith's act of revenge is softened by the protective nature of it which is absent from Grendel's Dam's pure revenge. Both women are edge examples of femininity, with both women being warriors and ladies at the same time, they do differ. Judith is the Lord's maiden and is helped by the Lord to accomplish her mission, while Grendel's Dam is kin to Cain and long forgotten by God. In the poem it reads about Grendel that he was an: 'unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain' (149). Grendel's Dam relations to Cain could be the underlying cause of her unsuccess,

and why she must follow her son's fate. After all, we read how God condemned Cain's kin (and so Grendel's dam as well) but would he also condemn the dam when she acts out of love and grief? She acts similarly to Wealtheow in which she tries to protect/seek vengeance for her child and acts out of motherly grief: she is ruled by her emotions. Would Wealtheow do the same if put in the same situation? This is, after all, what Judith did by killing Holofernes and bringing vengeance to her people and yet she has no kin in Cain. We are to judge her based on what we know about her kin and that she is a mother, acting out of pure pain and instinct. As a descendant of Cain's clan, it is in her nature to take justice into her own hands.

It has been mentioned in length the role the dam assumes as a mother and warrior, but it is important to point out that the dam is a woman as well. This is hinted by the erotic undertones in her fight with Beowulf, where the warrior is held down by the dam:

Quickly in her turn she repaid him his gift with her grim claws and clutched at him: then weary-hearted, the strongest of warriors, of foot soldiers, stumbled so that he fell. Then she sat upon the hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and bright-edged. (1509-1578)

Jane Chance says that such erotic battles between male and female are not unheard of in Anglo-Saxon poetry. One example is the battle between Judith and Holofernes (254). Judith grabs Holofernes, 'She seized the heathen man securely by his hair, pulled him shamefully towards her' (lines 80-81). The situation sounds very similar to the sexual undertones in the battle between the dam and Beowulf. In both situations, the women assume the dominant position (Chance 255). However, in the case of Grendel's Dam, the male decapitates the female, and the audience's emotive climax is consistent with the male victory instead of the female's as in *Judith*.

The dam also presents similarities with the other women who I have spoken about in this thesis: both her and Wealtheow are for example mothers and are looking after their children's wellbeing; The dam and the wife are both looking for a personal vengeance, but while the first acts upon it by bringing blood to the *hall of men*, the second curses her enemies. Similarly, to the other three women, Grendel's dam is an active character who shares similarities and dissimilarities to the others.

Chapter 4.3 Freawaru and Hildeburh: Ill-fated peace weavers

This short section will try to shed a small light over two often overlooked characters such as Freawaru and Hildeburh in order to further extend the discussion to other women who, similarly to Wealtheow, were acting as peace weaver but who unfortunately failed in their own task. Their climax scene might be when their marriages fails, and as a consequence they fail to function as peace weavers, Although the two characters both lack a voice, as in they do not talk in the poem, their climax brings the audience to experience sadness and loss because of the futile nature of the blood feud. Such analysis is not easy because little is known about Freawaru in *Beowulf* if not for a few lines in which Beowulf explains why he believes her marriage is doomed:

At times Hrothgar's daughter bore the ale-cup to the retainers, to the earls throughout the hall. I heard hall-sitters name her Freawaru when she offered the studded cup to warriors. Young and gold adorned, she is promised to the fair son of Froda. That has seemed good to the lord of the Scyldings, the guardian of the kingdom, and he believes of this plan that he may, with this woman, settle their portion of deadly feuds, of quarrels. Yet most often after the fall of a prince in any nation the deadly spear rests but a little while, even though the bride is good. (Lines 2020-2030).

The last few lines are very telling, and they help the reader understand Beowulf point of view of the entire situation. He says that although Freawaru is a good bride, the prince has died, and this places her in a dangerous situation and dooming her alliance. Freawaru, similarly to Wealtheow, tried to bring together a nation she could not save. Her task was impossible due to her circumstances and likely she will fail.

Hildeburh is another ill-fated character who despite trying to bring together an alliance, she is doomed to fail. Daughter of the Danish King Hoc, she marries Finn and unfortunately loses not only her brother, but also her son and husband. The following lines are translated by Treharne in *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1450 an Anthology*:

Indeed, Hildeburh had no need to praise
the loyalty of the Jutes; guiltless, she was deprived of her dear sons and brothers

in that shield-play; fated, they fell
wounded by the spear. That was a sad woman (Lines 1070-1075).

Hildeburh is described by the author as *a sad woman* a very familiar term we have been encountering for a while now, *geomuru ides*. Some translates it as mournful woman, others as a *sad woman* such as Renoir and, in this case, Elaine Treharne in *Old and Middle English*. Regardless of the translation, as we have seen in *The Wife's Lament*, these laments do not define these women as lacking strength nor agency, but they are a powerful device used to revendicate their narrative. How this narrative is revendicated is up to interpretation of scholars and the readers themselves.

Joyce Hill in *Beowulf A Prose Translation* contemplates on the importance of characters such as Freawaru and Hildeburh. According to the write they,

demonstrate how closely allied to historical reality as we now understand it heroic legend can sometimes be . . . The advantages of re-examining them in the light of modern assessments of the role of women in early medieval . . . establishes a relationship between the temporally imprecise world of legend and the world of the Anglo-Saxon audience (156).

All these women might have been invented by their writer, but this implication does not change that peace weavers did exist and went through the hardships that Freawaru and Hildeburh have go overcome. It is their existence in these poems that help scholars connect the dots. Instead of comparing these two to other female characters such as Judith and Wealtheow, readers should view Freawaru and Hildeburh as complementary characters that help shape a more distinctive image in the readers mind when it comes to what it meant be a woman in early medieval times. These women have power and feminine agency, such lays in their lack of words. Their climax is able to bring awareness of the futile nature of blood feuds and make the readers experience grief. Such powerful feelings are moved by their silence and the results of their stories. Inaction and docile willingness to be marries has a kind of power that increases when the marriage fails to prevent war and death on loved ones. Similar to elegiac poems as in *The Wife's Lament*, the climax is the rising sense of lament and loss. Similarly to Wealtheow, they are peace weavers regardless of the results of their failed marriages, and as queens their silence might be interpreted as the

decorum, or in other words as ‘something expected’ from them. Lastly, their strong willpower can be compared to Judith, although the latter decapitate her enemy and bring a blood vengeance, Freawaru and Hildeburh must suffer the loss of their beloved ones. Both examples deal with loss, Holofernes’ beheading is a physical loss while Freawaru and Hildeburh lose their beloved ones and their status as peace weavers.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the depth of female characters, often overlooked, and questioned their agency within their stories. Instead of comparing them to the male characters, their agency has been picked apart and compared to historical standards of the time and with other women in the body of the poem as well. Their active or passive feminine agency has been discussed in light of their climax scenes, or in other words, in light of the scenes in the poems where their actions, words and speech shines, and all the tension culminates into action. I asked in the beginning of this journey questions which I intend to revisit now to understand and pull together my discoveries throughout this analysis and think more about its limitation. This conclusion would not be possible without a brief reminder of my historical findings already set forth in all my previous chapters.

My historical findings on women at the time these poems and elegies were written are scattered throughout each chapter in this thesis, each finding dedicated to a specific woman. I did my best in summarizing these in a readable and enjoyable paragraph before diving in my conclusion. I found that there are often misconceptions surrounding the nature of women in Anglo-Saxons times, it did not help that men were the ones writing about them as Bitel explains in *Women in early Medieval Europe*. Damico in *Beowulf’s Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* explains that many misunderstandings surrounding higher status women such as Wealtheow stems from a misunderstanding on the nature of Germanic women and queens, who were not only allowed to sit by their husbands during banquets, but had troops of their own as well. Not all women of high birth married, others joined monasteries and depending on their social status, they would become Abbess. An Abbess functioned as a head of the house, and according to the definition given by the *Eleventh edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica*, Abbess were female superior of the woman’s aisle. Such revelation arises questions over women’s role

in transcribing stories, and epic poems. Wogan-Browne claims exactly that, that women had a bigger role in the contributions of poems such as *Beowulf* and *Judith*, but exactly what type of role it remains a mystery (Browne 230). This is the case of women of higher birth such as Wealtheow, but what about Judith and the wife? As we know, the latter had a different social status than the queen of the Danes. Women who did not have a higher role in society had little to no voice. During the ruling of Cnut in 1000 A.D., women who were found cheating on their husbands were punished by losing both nose and ears according to Whitelock. Women did not always hold high status and power, especially around the second Viking invasions in 980s. This period is a fragile one because of the numerous invasions, women were in a fragile state and often endangered. Queens for example did not always hold power, one instance are the words written by Esser in *Life of Alfred*, when the Asser writes about the West-Saxons who did not allow a queen to sit beside the king. Judith and the wife are widows and an abandoned woman, and not queens. The first one belonging to a patriarchal family structure and the second little is known about her and what happened to her husband. Judith is a hero from the Old Testament, as a woman her life was linked to her man, and her function as a woman was to be his companion. Moreover, Rabbi separated men from women because women were a cause of distraction to the man's prayers, but this did not mean that women had no active role in the Synagogue. Widows had a different status of their own, and surprisingly they had more independence. Women usually had a guardianship called *mundium* who usually was a father or a husband, if any violence was to be done to a woman her guardian would be given monetary compensation. Widows instead were under the guardianship of the Church and State, who acted as a more distant type of protection but still intimidating (Rivers 210). Judith did not have a *mundium* anymore, but surely, she could always count on God's protection.

In the beginning of this thesis, I asked why saving a nation would have befallen Judith. She was after all a maiden of God and a widow; she was not Beowulf the epic hero that bards sing about. The answer lay in the fact that she is not Beowulf, but she is exactly what her contemporaries needed during the various attacks by the Vikings (who in the story became the 'Assyrians') who pillaged, raped and caused disruptions. Judith is a maiden of God, someone who the enemy does not feel intimidated by, and is thanks to God's power that she is able to decapitate Holofernes and bring victory to her people. As Rivers wrote, a widow like Judith would be under special guardianship from the Church and the state, God himself grants her

immunity from sexual violence. The poem clearly states that Holofernes: 'intended to violate / the bright woman with defilement and with sin' (lines 58-59) but before the readers might lose their hopes for the heroine, the poem adds that God does not approve because God: 'would not consent to that' (line 60). This is an example of how much God's guardianship extends, even in the opening lines of the poem it says the following, 'she readily found protection from the glorious Lord' (line 3). Her heroic deeds cannot be explained as simply God interventions, because much of it is also thanks to Judith herself. The heroine is described as mindful, wise and prudent as she is obliged to enter her enemy's tent. These words 'mindful', 'wise' and 'prudent' does not seem to indicate someone who is scared of being defiled by her enemy. Schmitz discusses why Judith is so stoic when confronting her enemy, finding answers in how heroes standards were at the time, void of emotions as they deliver their climax scene. This stems by a Greek concept of stoicism, where a real hero would not let any emotions transpire in the moment of climax, Schmitz brings the example of Socrates who, when faced with death, is not scared (Schmitz 188). Real heroes lack emotions, and so does Judith. Speaking of Greece and their heroic standards, another Greek hero who remains stoic during his climax scene is Achilles. The hero is also aided by Zeus, similarly to God's divine intervention in *Judith*, further proving that the anonymous poet of *Judith* must have followed the Greek epic poems traditions. While Achilles can count on his superhuman strength and divine origins, Judith has everything the Assyrians lack: intellect and God a clever parallel with the Vikings invasions that happened at the time. The decapitation of Holofernes is significant for her agency because with his death, peace is restored, and the Assyrians have lost. Judith is a woman and the fact that a seemingly innocent lady can create havoc and bring despair to the Assyrians, is proof that God is almighty and powerful. God is not the only powerful agent in this climax, so is the scene itself. The climax makes the audience gasp, fulfilling the long hatred that was built from the moment Judith enters the tent. The audience, together with Judith, dreads Holofernes because they know what consequences will follow if Judith does not act. Oral tradition is based on creating emotions and *pathos*, the storyteller knows the audience will be tensed in the moments leading to the beheading and knows that they will be relieved and culminated once the climax scene reaches its peak. This oral theory is a reception theory that ties together with New Formalism. Galloway explored the parallelism of climax scenes with sexual expectations, culminating together in the rising act of vengeance and divine ecstasy. The concrete universal is met with Judith's own act,

similarly concrete in nature and pointing up above thanks to the rising climax. Her concrete nature is able to rise to such heights that she meets heavens, and God. This concrete nature linked to the ideal of celestial explains why Beowulf decapitates Grendel's dam. His action has risen to such height that the universal inertia of heaven's justice is with him and not with Grendel's dam. This would also explain why both Beowulf and Judith results as heroic, while Grendel's dam does not, despite her agency.

Wealtheow's climax scene might seem lacking when compared to Judith, but it is as powerful and important as her other female counterpart. Wealtheow enters the scene while followed by other women, 'crossed the path to the mead-hall with a troop of women' (line 924). The term 'troop of women' sounds as if Wealtheow is entering a battle scene, together with her troops. As Damico writes, Wealtheow is not only a queen but has a relation to the Valkyries, strong pure women (73). The term troop signifies that she is seen as an equal to her husband, according to Damico (74). The queen is also further described as wearing gold 'under a golden circlet' (line 1163) and the reader cannot help but imagine this powerful woman about to hold a speech wearing gold, a striking imagery. Wealtheow has the power to hold a speech, and this power has been proven by the detailed entrance she has made. Not only was she followed by a troop of maidens, but she is wearing gold. She is a true queen, equal to her husband and because of this equality she is allowed to hold a speech to congratulate Beowulf. She tells him to enjoy the banquet, but she also reminds him who he is speaking to: 'the noble warriors, having drunk to it, will do as I ask.' (line 1231). This is powerful reminder that she is the queen, and he is just a warrior, and that her men have sworn loyalty to her husband and to her. By doing so she reminds him that her sons can claim the throne for themselves, and that Beowulf is just a guest. The queen is looking after her children's wellbeing but instead of giving an emotional speech, she does so by being stoic and by following *decorum* and congratulating Beowulf for his deeds and welcoming him in the hall of men for as long as he shall want to be there. Indeed, she says 'Be fortunate as long as you live, / prince' (lines 1224-1225). She wishes fortune for Beowulf and calls him a prince. It is interesting how such a character can hold her emotions at bay, especially when speaking about her own children's wellbeing but this stoicism further proves that Wealtheow knows the *decorum* and social manners of her time, she knows her duties, her rights and her power and knows how to behave to achieve the 'greater good' (assuring her children can claim the throne for themselves).

The wife in *The Wife's Lament* is a mystery in her own rights, a riddle that leaves scholars still puzzled to this day. Her climax scene is bizarre, because she does not hold a speech to an audience, she does not decapitate her mortal enemy to revendicate her nation. The wife sits, weeps, and complains about her situation. She has been abandoned by her lord, and now she is forced into 'exile' although is not specified why. All the reader know is that the wife is miserable in this exile: 'because of this I cannot ever / rest from the sadness of my heart' (line 40 – 39). She also walks around an oak tree, during dawn 'While I walk alone at dawn / under the oak tree through these earth-dwellings. / There I must sit the summer-long day' (lines 35-37). The wife never explains why she must sit there all day during the summer, is it because she hopes her husband will come back? After some research over the infamous 'oak tree', it was evident that the choice of the tree was not just a mere coincidence. The oak tree was a special tree for the pagans, according to Ohlreg in *The Pagan iconography of Cristian Ideas: Tree lore in Anglo-Viking England*, where he explains that the pagan cult of worshipping trees was foreign to the Christians. According to Cusack, in *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* The pagans believed the oak tree to be sacred because it could bear three different fruits (Cusack 81). If the wife was performing some rituals around the oak tree, it makes sense that her lord's kin did not regard her in good terms: 'I possessed few dears in this region, / loyal friends.' (lines 16-17). The elegy arrives at its culmination when, at the end, she utters the curse where she wishes her pain to be inflicted onto others as well: 'The young man may always be sad in mind' (line 42). As she utters her curse, she is also somewhat understanding that her husband might be not be so glad as she expected him to be: 'My beloved suffers / much mental torment;' (lines 50-52). It is unclear what her words might signify, scholars such as Renoir believe the wife to be a 'sad woman' (trans. 'geomuru ides') while Strauss believe that her active agency stem from her apparent passivity, and believes she is uttering a curse and not just weeping about her exile. After a lengthy analysis I cannot help but read her words as Strauss does, the wife do not seem to be a passive character in this elegy. As Strauss explains, the mere fact that the wife speak is an example of active agency, because words and speech are actions (268). It is also worth mentioning that elegies in Anglo-Saxon period held a somewhat sad tone (Fumo 21). As Fumo suggests, self-elegies were also very popular at the time and does not come as a surprise that *The Wife's Lament* uses the self-elegy as a literary device as well. We cannot forget that the wife has just lost her husband, although we do not know why, this elegy cannot be anything but sad.

Other women who, because of limitations, could not have been explored more are Grendel's dam, Freawaru and Hildeburh. Grendel's dam is a warrior and a woman, a creature *kin* to Cain but also a mother. This character could hardly be compared to the other women, doing so would have been a mistake because of her biblical descends, but omitting her altogether would also have been problematic. Her femininity and masculinity blurs together, making her a difficult character to define. Her climax scene is the fight with Beowulf, where the reader can sense a sort of sexual undertone during the fight with Beowulf, when the warrior is held down by the dam. Jane Chance explores the reason behind such sexual tension and concludes that it was not unheard of, and we have seen a similar sexual undertone with Judith and Holofernes when she seized him by the hair: 'She seized the heathen man securely by his hair,' (line 80). While there are many similarities between the dam and Judith, there are also many differences. Grendel's dam is not a hero because she is consumed by her emotions, in stark contrast with the stoic Judith who followed the Greek concept of the stoic hero. Grendel's dam might not be completely at fault, she belongs to a *kin* who is known for their blood feuds. In addition to her *kin*, she has just lost a son. Such a loss is not shared with the other women in this thesis, the wife has been 'abandoned', Wealtheow is looking after her children's right to the throne (and they are still alive), while Judith is trying to revenge her people and her status of a widow is given more as a piece of information to qualify her as a maiden of God than as a woman in plain grief. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate if these women would still be stoic if faced with a loss of a dear one, such as one's son.

Freawaru and Hildeburh as similar in their situation, both peace weavers whose unions are doomed from the start. Beowulf himself does not believe Freawaru's wedding will be enough to keep the peace, and he is correct. Although Freawaru has followed her duties as a peace-weaver, her husband has suddenly died. Not even a perfect peace-weaver can do much about a situation like that. Her failure seems to be outside her duties and power. Similarly, Hildeburh failed peace-weaving attempts seems to be outside of her duties and power, she has fulfilled her role but because of the loss of her brothers, son and husband she fails at bringing peace. Unfortunately, these women are only talked about in *Beowulf* and they do not have any significant scenes in the poem itself. The lack of any significant climax scenes for these two women is the reason why they are mentioned but not further analyzed in this thesis.

Judith, Wealtheow and the wife are *injured* women, they do not fit the stereotypical male heroic figure but are anyway holding their grounds. Why did the anonymous poets give such importance to these characters? I believe the answer lies in the fact that these women are not injured at all. We can all agree that Judith is at an evident disadvantage when she is entering Holofernes' tent, but we cannot forget that she has God on her side. The reader understands that no matter what Holofernes will do, God is aiding Judith and will make sure the woman will end up succeeding: 'she began to call the Guardian of heaven, by name' (line 80). Wealtheow does not appear injured as well. Such ideas stem from a misunderstanding of Germanic tribes and queens. Germanic queens were allowed to sit in the *halls* with their husbands, and we see how Wealtheow enters the *hall of men* with a 'troop of women', as if to indicate that she has her own army as well. As Damico also explains, Wealtheow holds as much power as her husband. It is true that other peace weavers such as Freawaru and Hildburh failed to ascend to the throne at the death of their husbands, historically one woman succeeded in doing so. The Lady of the Mercian might be the exception to the rule, but her decade long of ruling cannot be overlooked. Such was the power that Germanic queens could hold. They had the rights to possess land, disown their own sons but with great rights also came harder punishments. As we have seen, adulterous women were mutilated if found out. Wealtheow cannot be seen as an injured character, she was walking a perilous path filled with duties, punishments and rewards. As she said herself 'the noble warriors, having drunk to it, will do as I ask.' (line 1231). Not only she has the loyalty of her 'troop of maidens' but she can also count on the loyalty of her husband's men. Lastly, the wife is not completely hopeless, she has a voice and she uses it to utter a curse. As Strauss writes, the act of speaking is an active agency in its own right. She has been given a voice, and she is using it to bring awareness to her situation: 'I can only weep about my exile, / . . . because of this I cannot ever rest from the sadness of my heart,' (lines 38- 40). She is only able to cry, because there is not much that can change her situation, well this is bound to change when she uses her words to utter a curse: 'The young man may always be sad in mind' (line 42). Her words are used to hurt, and while some might argue that it is a selfish agency, one cannot still deny that such an agency is still active.

These women are not injured, but powerful in their own rights. As to why the anonymous poets did give such importance to female characters might just stem to the fact that women of similar social status than men held a somewhat equal importance. One cannot forget that while

analyzing these texts we are doing so without applying any modern lenses to the women. We cannot hold modern standards to women of the Anglo-Saxons periods if we are to analyze their activity and passivity. Certainly, women of the medieval times would never hold the same active agency that women do to these days, times have changed, laws have been improved/created in most developed countries. This development does not take away from the active agency that these women have shown in their climax scenes. While Judith has decapitated a man, Wealtheow held a speech as a queen during the Anglo-Saxon period; In the meantime, the wife uttered a curse to the ones who had ill-intent against her. These women show initiative, power and feminine agency. They do not resort to brawl violence, although one might argue this one bit when Judith decapitates Holofernes, but use intellect. I argue that although Judith is killing Holofernes, the way she comes around doing so is not just a mere violent act but a thoughtful one:

Then the Saviour's
glorious handmaiden was very mindful
of how she could deprive of the terrible one
of life most easily (lines 73 – 76).

Hers is not a manifestation of brawl power, but an intellectual one. She is not stronger than Holofernes in physical power, but she had God to her side and that makes her stronger. Similarly, Wealtheow is not stronger than Beowulf but she is a queen while he is a prince, and she makes sure to remind him of such:

Enjoy this circlet, belong young Beowulf,
. . . show yourself with strength, and be kind to my boys . . .
Be fortunate as long as you live,
prince. I wish well for you (lines 1216 – 1225).

Her strength consists on her social status, higher than Beowulf, and reminding him of such does only validate this stance further. The wife's power is instead in her own words, the uttering of the curse gives her an advantage against her enemies. While are unaware and living in their village, the wife is in exile and uttering a curse:

The young man may always be sad in mind,
hard-hearted in thought just as he must have
a happy appearance despite the grief in his breast
of a multitude of perpetual sorrows, (lines 42 – 45)

While the people lay unaware of her existence, the wife strikes making sure that they must follow in her steps and their hearts be filled with sorrow. These climax scenes, although different from one another, are examples of how these women are able to push to champion their feminine agency and at the same time push back the idea that modern historian attributes passivity to them. They are not injured, they are empowered women who uses their faith, their social status and their words to channel their femininity and revendicate what was taken away from them: their words. Their agency is complexed, just as much as they are. They do not need to recur to masculine power but use their female voices to bring awareness to their position. They are a fictional window of a deeper and nuanced historical period; they reflect the voices of women who did not have any and their appearance in these poems further proves that feminine presence was expected by the male audience. Of course, Wealtheow would hold a speech in the eyes of Anglo-Saxon contemporaries, she was a queen after all. Of course, the wife would utter a curse, she has been abandoned and clearly shows pagan rituals by circumambulating the oak tree at dawn. Lastly, Judith can punish Holofernes because God is guiding her, and he could only guide a pure woman against the brutes Assyrians.

Their climax scenes are not empowered because of the emotional impact they carry, but because of their lack of it. While the scene culminates the tension that brewed throughout the poem, the heroines are stoic and calm, a juxtaposition of the dire situations they are facing. One wrong move and Judith will be raped and killed. Wealtheow might follow a similar punishment if she is to disrespect the man that saved her family and whom her husband, Hrothgar, loves and respects. The wife just might fall victim of her own curse, and forever be stuck in her cave (and not only during the summer). Maybe these scenes were given to women because only they could convince and conduct such behaviors, be level-headed and result victorious. Or maybe, is because it was expected for a woman to do so. Such answers will remain a mystery as long as no more discoveries are made. To conclude this thesis, one cannot help but applaud these women for not only being active but for challenging modern views of women in Anglo-Saxon times.

Freawaru, Hildeburh, Grendel's dam, Judith, Wealtheow and the wife are strong, powerful feminine heroines with active agency, challenging our understanding of what it meant to be a woman in a time of Viking raids, fear and death. Only centuries later will the world be leading towards a self-discovery of the human importance in the cosmic order, placing itself in the middle instead of orbiting around God, and only years later will these poems be analyzed by modern eyes and give a renewed voice to these women, for more centuries to come.

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