Gender Roles in *Beowulf*:

An Investigation of Male-Male and Male-Female Interactions

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

English

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2010
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Abstract

The interactions of Beowulf's characters allow readers to dig deeper into the specific role each character plays and why first impressions can often be misleading. By analyzing male-male interactions and male-female interactions, I am able to assess various characters' feelings toward Beowulf.

Interactions can be verbal, using dialogue, or nonverbal, using only the poet's narration to describe the characters' relationship. Obviously, verbal interactions are easier to analyze because both characters are able to speak their minds and give us a glimpse of their intentions. On the outside, characters who challenge Beowulf, like Unferth, seem villainous, but there are underlying reasons for the appearance of hostility. Readers are also able to see female characters who are typically considered weak in a completely different context. They are subtly powerful and are keenly aware, attuned to the needs of their respective kingdoms. Without an analysis of these and other interactions, characters like Unferth and Grendel's mother are misunderstood and quickly stereotyped.
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Gender Interaction: Introducing Beowulf's Multi-Faceted Characters

Beowulf's characters and their respective roles in the story are quite familiar to literary scholars and students, but few consider the importance of these characters' interactions with one another. The battles of Beowulf and his companions against the monsters terrorizing Hrothgar and his kingdom are well-known, but the way in which gender plays a role in the interactions among characters is rarely taken into account. Male-to-male interactions in the poem differ greatly from those between males and females. Because he is the hero of the tale, most interactions center around Beowulf, so these will be the focal points of this discussion. For the whole of my examination, I will be using Seamus Heaney's translation of the poem.

Arthur G. Brodeur states in “The Structure and the Unity of Beowulf” that Beowulf's “heroic qualities – that is, the sum of all those qualities which make him what he is, not merely matchless strength and courage – are displayed most beautifully and significantly in his personal relationships. These are the mainspring and the inspiration of his actions” (1188). When Beowulf speaks to another character, it is generally for one of several reasons. The first distinction to consider is always the gender of the character to whom Beowulf speaks. There is a definite difference between male-male interactions and male-female interactions. In the case of male-male interactions, he may be praising the honor and nobility of a king such as Hrothgar or Hygelac or answering the challenge of a doubter like Unferth. Male-female interactions, though short in length and few in number, are characterized by Beowulf's gift-giving, vow-confirming, and nonverbal battling.

Many scholars have written about Beowulf's interactions with specific characters
in the epic. The flyting with Unferth is a popular incident because he is the only character to challenge Beowulf other than the three monsters, and Unferth is considered a villain because of it. Henry Bosley Woolf shows Unferth's hostility towards Beowulf as antagonistic but powerful because only a character with some amount of importance would be taken seriously while questioning Beowulf's intentions. Others such as Carol Clover believe Unferth's character is unnecessarily considered evil because of his controversial role, yet Hrothgar never chastises Unferth for his combative statements in court. Perhaps he is not the villain many readers consider him to be.

In chapter one, I explore Unferth's role in the poem and how his attitude towards Beowulf changes throughout the poem. Rather than seeing him as a villain, I believe that he is acting as Hrothgar's conscience by showing doubt when doubt is the unpopular feeling. Beowulf arrives in Heorot promising to rid Hrothgar and his kingdom of Grendel. No other warrior has succeeded, yet the entire kingdom places its blind faith in the foreigner. Unferth seems to be the only character with an immunity to Beowulf's confident boasting. I demonstrate how, because of his misunderstood hostility, Unferth's interaction with Beowulf is clearly atypical of other male-male interactions throughout Beowulf. While Unferth's interactions with Beowulf are atypical, the way the hero responds to the two kings, the subject of chapter two, is more common for male-male interactions.

Because of his accomplishments as a warrior, Beowulf has been able to impress and gain the trust of two kings: Hrothgar (leader of the Danes) and Hygelac (leader of the Geats). Each plays a paternal role to Beowulf because of Hrothgar's impromptu adoption and Hygelac's deep concern for the hero's safe return; however, these summations are
unsubstantiated considering the interactions and circumstances between the characters. Kemp Malone discusses Beowulf's past and allows readers to ponder Hrothgar's knowledge of it. If we examine how much Hrothgar truly knows about Beowulf, we can then question Hrothgar's quick decision to immediately trust Beowulf. Edward B. Irving also points out Hrothgar's leniency in his kingdom considering that Beowulf shows through his words and actions that the Danes are unable to defend themselves. He is attempting to mask his ineffective kingship. Having reviewed these scholars' opinions, I suggest a different explanation of Hrothgar, one which directly connects him to Unferth.

Hrothgar's stress over Grendel has clearly left him unable to question Beowulf thoroughly enough to prove the warrior's intentions. The kingdom sees a world-renowned champion and immediately believes he will win. Anyone who contradicts this feeling will be considered treacherous. Hrothgar wants to continue his rule as a beloved king, so he gives Beowulf every consideration possible, including temporary rule of Heorot and a promise of adoption. Believing in Beowulf was a politically sound decision, and, though his gratitude is sincere, the adoption of Beowulf as his son seems to also be a popular decision for all except Wealhtheow. Hrothgar leaves the task of doubt to Unferth. The faith and generosity presented by Hrothgar to Beowulf are extremely typical of other male-male interactions in the poem such as those with Wulfgar and Heorot's guard.

A second king is also discussed in chapter two: Hygelac. Arthur G. Brodeur discusses the deep bond Beowulf shares with Hygelac, king of the Geats. Though Hygelac appears only once in the epic, his name is referenced (mostly by Beowulf) many times. John Hill speculates that there may be a question of Beowulf's loyalty to Hygelac
since he continues to aid Hrothgar, but the interactions with both Hrothgar and Hygelac present his loyalty to his homeland and his lord. I believe that the feelings Hygelac and Beowulf share are more paternal than any other relationship presented throughout the poem. Their relationship and short interaction are also typical of male-male interactions seen in *Beowulf*.

The second type of interactions explored are those between male and female characters in *Beowulf*. Of particular importance is Beowulf's nonverbal interaction/fight with Grendel's mother during the second section of the poem, the subject of chapter three. Again we are presented with a character quickly categorized as a villain because of her fatal attack on Heorot following the death of her son. The majority of scholarly work centering on Grendel's mother deals with classification. Is she female? Human? Monster? Civilized? These questions are difficult to answer for linguistic reasons as well as because of her actions in the story. Renée R. Trilling and Pat Belanoff both evaluate Grendel's mother. Trilling considers her actions through the linguistic community and decides the difficulty lies in the character's underwriting of the social organization within the poem. Belanoff gives characteristics of the female image in Old English poetry, and it is clear that Grendel's mother is not an exact fit. Grendel's mother is a difficult character to pinpoint, but I see her as more than a monster.

Because there is no king in the mere, Grendel's mother is the leader. When one of her kinsmen (Grendel) is killed, it is not just an attack on her as a mother. It is also an attack on her kingdom. She is prepared to face her attackers and wants nothing more than revenge for her son's death. The nonverbal interaction she holds with Beowulf makes the fight more difficult to analyze. Reading the narrative cues given by the
Beowulf-poet helps demonstrate that she is definitely female and seeking justice for her son's death. Beowulf has de-feminized his opponent to make her worthy of his time and effort, and she has centered her attack firstly on Æschere (whom she kills in revenge), then Beowulf as a threat to the mere. She acts in similar fashion to both Hrothgar and Beowulf, and the difference lies in her gender.

The final crucial interactions to explore are those between Beowulf and the queens, Wealhtheow and Hygd, the subject of chapter four. Wealhtheow is clearly a strong woman throughout the poem even if her appearances are short and few. Brian McFadden believes that she has seen Hrothgar's weaknesses as king and taken over the decision-making, hence her contest to Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf. Michael Murphy also discusses her role in the meadhall to transform Beowulf's boasts into vows of protection. It is not until she enters the conversation that Beowulf's boasts are formally accepted. As a woman, Wealhtheow is not given the opportunity to hold power, but Joyce Hill is able to give her the much-deserved recognition as a powerful woman in relation to other strong women throughout Old English literature.

Wealhtheow is intelligent and has more control over Heorot than we are led to believe, but I believe that she does what is necessary to protect her kingdom without disrupting her family's royal lineage. When Hrothgar offers Beowulf the kingdom, Wealhtheow is more than concerned about having a Geatish ruler. She does not want to see her sons or nephew bypassed for a stranger who defeats two monsters. Wealhtheow becomes the voice of reason and tells Beowulf that his place is as advisor to her kin and his allegiance to Hygelac should not be broken. Her strength as a female character is not seen in other non-villainous characters. Her interactions with Beowulf are respectful, yet
stern. Clearly, she is an atypical female character.

The second queen encountered is Hygd. As Hygelac's queen, she has responsibility to choose his successor after his death in Frisia. She is a minor character and, as Hill explains, her speech to Beowulf offering him the throne is not worthy of dialogue (240). Her actions are summarized in narrative which shows a difference between male and female characters. It also shows a difference in female characters because Wealhtheow's words are written out (even if Beowulf does not respond directly to them). Hygd's emotional response to Beowulf may be similar to most other characters in that she believes in his strength, but she is not willing to adopt him as a son. She lacks confidence in her son, Heardred. The defense of her kingdom is of critical importance, and because she believes that Heardred would be an incompetent ruler, Beowulf is her favored choice as heir to the throne. As with Wealhtheow, her kingdom is her first priority. Hygd's interaction with Beowulf is typical of male-female encounters in Beowulf.

I have concentrated my study on Beowulf and the interactions between characters seen within its lines. My direct exploration of the interactions yields new and interesting interpretations of several characters' attitudes toward Beowulf. Villains have become unsung heroes while minor, supposedly weak characters have shown their strength, confidence, and acute precision in the governing of a kingdom.
1: Unraveling Unferth's Hostility

Although Beowulf is praised by many and considered a hero, there exist in Hrothgar's kingdom those who believe Beowulf's feats are exaggerated. One such character who truly and openly challenges Beowulf's strength is Unferth. During the feast at Heorot before Beowulf faces Grendel, Unferth attempts to discredit one of Beowulf’s accomplishments: the sea race against Breca. The superhuman protagonist is accused of being arrogant and obstinate, a failure in the face of opposition, and predestined to be defeated by Heorot's menace. Even though Beowulf is a world-renowned hero being honored by Hrothgar, Unferth presumably allows his envy to govern his interaction with Beowulf.

Scholars have introduced many explanations for Unferth's first interaction with Beowulf. He has been deemed a villain, jester, þyle, priest, and commendable figure. Authors such as Henry Bosley Woolf, Geoffrey Hughes, Ida Masters Hollowell, and others have all chosen sides either in support or opposition of Unferth and his calculated attempts to diminish Beowulf’s pride and unquestioned authority. My argument is that Unferth's interaction with Beowulf is uncharacteristic of other male-male interactions within the context of Beowulf as a piece of Old English literature in the sense that Unferth is the only man in Hrothgar's court who isn't automatically enamored with the foreign hero. Other male-male interactions are cordial and sentimental while Unferth seems cold and villainous.

Unferth seems to disregard the respect for rank system that every other character understands. He openly dismisses Hrothgar's praise and faith in Beowulf's abilities by stating, “No matter, therefore, how you may have fared / in every bout and battle until
now, / this time you'll be worsted; no one has ever / outlasted an entire night against Grendel” (lines 525-528). Clearly, Unferth believes that there is a positive correlation between his version of Beowulf's battle with Breca, wherein Beowulf is the obvious loser, and his forthcoming battle with the beast terrorizing Heorot. Although this seems like a clear-cut example of male-male animosity, there is more to this interaction than just jealousy and cruel intentions.

In a situation where tales of male prowess against an enemy are expected and encouraged, it seems likely that Unferth should not have been surprised when Beowulf gave his version of the race with Breca. Actually, Unferth is not only taunting the hero but also preparing the rest of the meadhall for Beowulf's subsequent rebuttal. Unferth sets the stage for Beowulf's valiant effort.

One way to read the encounter is to believe that Unferth's hurtful comments toward Beowulf are meant to diminish his confidence so Unferth can capture a bit of the limelight in Heorot, but another explanation is possible. Beowulf has made a proposition to Hrothgar from the beginning of the tale to relieve Heorot of its gruesome foe. Although the king believes in Beowulf's boast and is aware of his past accomplishments, other characters require more than a verbal list of previous achievements to gain faith in the Geatish stranger. Unferth urges Beowulf to further his commitment to Hrothgar by revisiting his encounter with Breca. In return Beowulf insults Unferth's manhood stating,

You killed your own kith and kin,
so for all your cleverness and quick tongue,
you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell . . . if you were truly as keen or courageous as you claim to be
Grendel would never have got away with
such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,
havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.
But he knows he need never be in dread
of your blade making a mizzle of his blood
or of a vengeance arriving ever from this quarter. (lines 587-597)

He is also confirming his allegiance to the goal of restoring Heorot to its previous glory before the monster's attacks. Unferth can be seen as an antagonist who simply hates Beowulf. On the other hand, the story's first male-female encounter appears shortly after the Unferth/Beowulf skirmish. Reading the male-female encounter and revisiting the male-male skirmish provides an alternate explanation for Unferth's actions. He is simply insisting that Beowulf should demonstrate his commitment beyond verbal boasting and affirmation.

In “Unferth,” Henry Bosley Woolf explains how Unferth undertakes the burden of antagonizing Beowulf and contradicting his boasting with one of Beowulf's apparent failures. Woolf states, “It is what one would expect from a man named Unferth, from one who is uneasy lest he be exceeded in valor, and it could hardly have been spoken by anyone not in a position of some importance” (146). Although Unferth's character seems only to act as Beowulf's human adversary, his character is the one person whom causes hostility towards Beowulf in Hrothgar's kingdom other than Grendel and Grendel's mother in a time when everyone else grants Beowulf blind faith. This places him in a position of power throughout the story because he shows that Beowulf's might does not give him unequivocal respect in a foreign land. Woolf remarks that Unferth “is a man in
whom envy and jealousy are strong, and so he is not happy over Beowulf's coming to Denmark. He does not want any man to surpass him in the achieving of fame” (146). Unferth is a warrior in the court of Hrothgar. He is also seated at Hrothgar's feet during the feast before Beowulf's battle with Grendel. From his physical position and previously known warrior status, the question arises as to why he should feel jealousy and envy towards Beowulf. He has already proven himself worthy to Hrothgar and the court, but there still exists a need; the need to confirm the trust Hrothgar has so easily placed in Beowulf. Woolf's summary of Unferth's place in the court helps to position Beowulf and Unferth's skirmish within the context of Hrothgar's trust and the kingdom's fear of Grendel.

Woolf continues his explanation of Unferth's actions when he states that a man with the name Unferth would be expected to confidently contradict Beowulf's boasting in front of the entire court. In Jane Roberts' “Old English Un- 'Very' and Unferth,” the prefix un- is explored and defended in both positive and negative connotations. Much of her overview describes un- as projecting pejorative qualities on its root or intensifying an already negative root. Particularly mentioned roots that “seem to display the intensive prefix [are] unæt 'gluttony', unlust 'lust', unrad 'a hostile raid', unstenc 'stink'” (290). From these specific words, we begin to understand how the Beowulf poet constructed Unferth as a character especially in this specific dispute with Beowulf.

Geoffrey Hughes accepts the negative meaning of this prefix and applies it to his interpretation of Unferth's name. In “Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting: An Interpretation,” Hughes does not even feel it is necessary “to put much emphasis on the literal significance of Unferth's name...'mar-peace' or 'un-peace', when there is such unequivocal
evidence in the poem that he is part of a leitmotiv of crime” (390). However, under further examination, Roberts also notes the rarely used version of un- which is less pejorative and more intensifying found in *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood*.

Using and referencing Fred C. Robinson's “Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence,” Roberts explains that “A reinterpretation of the name Unferth, following Robinson's identification of the element *-ferhð* rather than *-frið* but suggesting an intensifying *un-*, would give this important Danish warrior a commendatory name, wisdom and greatness of heart” (291), and these characteristics are shown in his generous gift of Hrunting to Beowulf later in the tale. From Roberts' definition, Unferth's name would not seem negative since the root word is peace. Unferth, as his name suggests when interpreted as 'very peace', will continually attempt to bring security to the kingdom. Unfortunately, because of a possible misinterpretation of his name, Unferth has been portrayed unfavorably. Readers and scholars may need to stop concentrating on the successes of Beowulf and begin to view Unferth as more than Beowulf's antagonistic foe in Hrothgar's kingdom.

Roberts' information is particularly useful in showing that Unferth is no more a villain than Beowulf. My theory is that Hrothgar is so overwhelmed by Beowulf's presence and confidence that he cannot find a way to question Beowulf's intentions. Unferth is there to be the voice of reason in a time of panic and vulnerability. Scholar Carol J. Clover seems to concur in her article “The Germanic Context of the Unferð Episode” as she compares the Beowulf/Unferth encounter to a Nordic flyting. After describing the main elements universal to all flytings (setting, contenders, dramatic situation, content, and outcome), Clover then puts the skirmish in perspective. She
writes,

[Hrothgar] at no time acts like a flouted lord: he does not intervene in the debate, and when it is over, he neither chastises Unferth nor apologizes to Beowulf. That his silence must indicate sponsorship, or at least 'lie in the presumption that Unferth's behavior is expected,' seems clear. In other words, his cordiality and Unferth's hostility are not contradictory but complimentary, with the former in fact predicted on the latter: secure in the knowledge that Unferth will put the alien through the necessary paces, Hrothgar can afford to play the gracious host. (141)

Unferth is unnecessarily considered a villain because of the root and prefix of his name as well as his controversial role in court, but there is clearly more to Unferth's character than the antagonistic opposite of the heroic Beowulf.

Another role of Unferth's character that is in contention is þyle. The main issue with this role is that the term can be translated to mean anything from jester to priest to villain, but the translation of the word is not my main concern. Regardless of the connotations for the name of Unferth's role, his actions and interactions with Beowulf continue to show that he is not an inherently evil character. James L. Rosier, as recounted in Ida Masters Hollowell's “Unferð the þyle in Beowulf,” believes that þyle has evil connotations, Unferth's character is meant to be treacherous, and that he is “part of the Beowulf poet's large 'design for treachery’” (240). However, Hollowell helps confirm my notion of Unferth's innocence of the villain charges by refuting Rosier stating, “the only evidence for the þyle's duplicity in the action of the poem comes from the speech addressed to Beowulf shortly after the latter's arrival, while from his generosity in the matter of swords, and Beowulf's subsequent regard for him, one cannot convincingly
argue that he is assigned a villain's role in the poem” (240). Although the beginning of this statement seems to reaffirm Unferth's destructive intentions towards Beowulf, Hollowell continues to say that the explanation for his speech at Beowulf's arrival helps to “prevail in an estimation of his character” (240). Unferth is showing that he does not mean to offend Beowulf, but he realizes that he must represent the kingdom if Hrothgar will not. Again we witness Unferth's ability to see beyond the celebrity of Beowulf and propose the difficult questions which Hrothgar had overlooked.

Woolf, on the other hand, believes that the Unferth/Beowulf encounter is little more than a distraction for Beowulf in his ultimate quest which brings him to the Danish lands. He states, “But Beowulf is in Denmark to fight a monster, not to engage in debate; and it has been some time since he thought of the purpose of his visit” (148). His human adversary has been reduced to another defeat in Beowulf's battle history. Woolf says, “Unferth is charged with cowardice, for he has not dared attempt the deeds which Beowulf performed as a youth . . . he is guilty of the murder of his kin . . . which, Beowulf declares, will bring him damnation, however excellent his wit” (148). The prowess of Unferth as a warrior is diminished because of his fratricide. His only weapon is his wit, and Beowulf is definitely unafraid of Unferth as an adversary.

If the negative associations with Unferth's name are disregarded, one can easily see that Unferth is not simply another adversary for Beowulf to overcome. Unferth's questioning of Beowulf's accomplishments and strength appears unnecessary and to serve no profitable purpose, but he is helping to relax the fanfare created by Beowulf's grand entrance and Hrothgar's unconditional faith. Unferth serves as the voice of reason in a kingdom overrun by the hope placed in a stranger's hands. Because of Hrothgar's history
with Beowulf and his ancestors, there are no carefully reasoned decisions as to whether or not Beowulf will actually be Denmark's savior. Unferth can see Beowulf as less than godlike, and he is trying to spread his skepticism and doubt. After having the town rampaged several times and the residents murdered by the handfuls by outsiders, notably Grendel, a savior preaching the total annihilation of enemies would seem dreamlike, but easily accepting a stranger could lead to an overthrow and destruction of Hrothgar's kingdom by the foreign Geat. Unferth is simply showing caution in a time of great distress.

This explanation seems reasonably sound considering that no one in the hall (regardless of status) posits an opinion or voices an issue with Unferth's questioning. While the rest of Heorot is celebrating the appearance of a savior, Unferth assumes the unofficially appointed representative voice of reason among the Danes, as Edward B. Irving, Jr. writes in *Rereading Beowulf*: “it is conceivable that the Danes have deliberately assigned Unferth to play this role for them. They may at least have permitted him to play it, knowing by experience that he was by nature the quickest to resentment of them all and thus an ideal 'delegate’”; Irving continues that this “interpretation would also explain why no one reproves him for his rudeness to a guest” (39), the guest they consider the redeemer of Heorot. If even King Hrothgar could not find the necessity in doubting a stranger, Unferth made caution his first priority.

Unferth knows that no one has ever been able to stand up to Grendel, including any past or present warrior in the kingdom, and there is no expectation that Beowulf will be able to perform such an act. Unferth says, “No matter, therefore, how you may have fared / in every bout and battle until now; / this time you'll be worsted; no one has ever /
outlasted an entire night against Grendel” (lines 525-528). If others were unable, Unferth is questioning why the kingdom should have blind faith in a man who is only known by Hrothgar. As Geoffrey Hughes states, “Unferth does concede that Beowulf has been victorious everywhere else, and is really making the point that only a hero undefeated by any man will stand a chance against Grendel” (386). Unferth is driving the logical point that Grendel is not an easily defeated foe, and there is a chance that Beowulf is not the all-powerful defender of Denmark. Like Irving states, “If the Danes' many boasts about defeating Grendel could never be carried out, and if Beowulf's boast about beating Breca in the swimming-contest could never be carried out, why then should anyone expect that the hero's present boast offers any promise of fulfillment?” (41). This reasonable doubt, combined with Unferth's willingness to voice an unpopular opinion, shows that Unferth's challenge is not a simple case of envy but rather concern for the well-being of his fellow Danes.

Unferth is the character who brings Beowulf's identity as hero into question by challenging the historical achievements worthy of his boasting. Even though Beowulf would like to affirm that the boasts of his past are true and a harbinger of the success to come against Grendel (and the subsequent two monsters), he realizes that it is not useful to expect everyone simply to believe in his words without physical evidence. Unferth helps Beowulf with this realization. Kim writes, “Beowulf recognizes that he cannot simply counter Unferth's charge with the identifying story of his own 'true' past, because the mere fact of Unferth's accusation presents the inevitable alienability of that past and thus the impossible instability of the identity he constructs by boasting” (15). In the simplest way, Unferth makes Beowulf realize that no matter what he has previously
accomplished, there needs to be some type of physical evidence of his heroic prowess. Hearing of Beowulf's exploits and confident successes would be impressive, but, as Hughes writes, Unferth realizes that “his version of the swimming-contest with Breca (i.e. that Breca defeated Beowulf) could be the right one. It is only Beowulf's word against his” (386). Everyone in Hrothgar's kingdom automatically believes Beowulf's credentials, but Unferth's skepticism allows the kingdom to protect itself and the reader to realize that “We attribute a heroic credibility to Beowulf, naturally, and do not attach much weight to the ambiguity in the hero's reply” (386). We want to trust the protagonist of the story. Unferth is urging us to extend our trust to other characters as well, especially himself.

Beowulf's interaction with Unferth may be short and hostile, but Unferth becomes increasingly important to Beowulf's existence as the heroic character. Other than the monsters he faces, no human characters before or after Unferth's interaction with Beowulf challenge his noteworthy past or their faith that he will successfully defend Heorot. The mockery was meant to hurt Beowulf and deprive him of his shining moment amongst the men of the meadhall, but it is also clear that Beowulf has taken more from this bout of animosity. The people of Hrothgar's kingdom, Unferth included, truly believe in his boast, and Beowulf has been able to re-actualize himself as the hero culminating with the presentation of Grendel's arm.

Beowulf constructs his identity through boasting, therefore he must continue doing so to enhance this identity construction every time he faces a new and greater foe. First he raced Breca and fought with the sea monsters encountered during the race, and he now faces a foe who has afflicted an entire kingdom. Unferth has helped audiences
realize that Beowulf's identity is constantly being remodeled by the next heroic act available to him and the boasting completed just before the act. He is “compelled by his boast to attempt to align his words and deeds identically” (Kim 10), and this compulsion, brought about by the rebuttal boasts to Unferth, follows Beowulf into battle with Grendel. After the defeat of Grendel and directly before Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother, Unferth re-enters the story. He has realized that Beowulf is worthy of his praise and respect, and he no longer feels the need to question or mock the hero. Instead he places a rare and ancient sword called Hrunting under Beowulf's care. The *Beowulf*-poet writes,

> When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,
> Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,
> could hardly have remembered the ranting speech
> he had made in his cups. He was not man enough
> to face the turmoil of a fight under water
> and the risk to his life. So there he lost
> fame and repute. It was different for the other
> rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle. (lines 1465-1472)

Unferth understands the severity of his people's situation and how much they rely on and trust Beowulf's skill in battle. Beowulf's previous comments on Unferth's inability to protect his king from Grendel again weigh down Unferth in the fight against Grendel's mother. He knows now that he cannot successfully take Beowulf's place, and his identity as a weak follower of Beowulf begins to take shape. As Woolf states, “The man who, the day before, had been quarrelsome is now silent, for Beowulf has matched word with
deed” (149). Although his concerns at the start of Beowulf's adventure were unwarranted, they show that he truly wanted to protect his kingdom, as would any valiant warrior. Automatically trusting a stranger is not usually a dependable method of security, and Unferth's questions show his loyalty to Hrothgar and his fellow citizens.

There is a distinct relationship between Beowulf and Unferth that forms the identity of each. With every new interaction and each battle, Beowulf becomes stronger and more respected while Unferth is weakened and realizes his place as a faithful member of the Beowulf bandwagon. Each of the two characters can stand alone, but the pair transform one another during each separate interaction. Unferth may seem fickle, but he, along with Beowulf, is actually resolving an identity crisis. Presenting Hrunting to Beowulf eliminates another part of Unferth's identity (the last remnant of his identity as a warrior), so he will no longer be able to diminish the hero's spirit. He does not hold the will to again be a fighter and, in giving his sword to the hero, he passes on his means and, metaphorically, his right to become one. It is not until after Grendel's mother is defeated and Beowulf returns to the court that Hrunting is returned to Unferth and Unferth again feels whole as a man and warrior when Beowulf “said he had found it a friend in battle / and a powerful help; he put no blame / on the blade's cutting edge” (lines 1810-1812).

Some critics believe that Unferth knew his sword Hrunting would be useless in the mere against Grendel's mother, and Unferth hopes for the demise of Beowulf. The continuation of their feud seems unlikely, however, looking at the text. Beowulf is being outfitted in what seems to be the best weaponry available: finely webbed chain mail, beaten gold helmet, and Unferth's sword. Irving agrees stating that it is “quite impossible
to believe that this king of poets would secretly slip a defective weapon into a sequence describing excellent weapons. We would have our attention called to Unferth's base treachery [killing of his kinsmen] if the sword Hrunting was its symbol” (44). The Danish warriors including Unferth have tried and failed to produce a successful fight against their enemies, and they now clearly rely on Beowulf to free them of their oppressors. Because he is the former warrior who challenged Beowulf and was proven wrong, Unferth becomes “a symbol of national rather than merely private inadequacy” (40), knowing that he will never be able to complete the conquests Beowulf already has for Heorot. It would be unwise to supply Beowulf with anything less than the greatest weaponry and armor available. Unferth would not want to disgrace his already damaged honor as a warrior by ensuring Beowulf's demise with a faulty weapon.

Beowulf always believed in himself and his fighting abilities, but Unferth's doubt raised his awareness of the need truly to prove himself as a hero to the Danes. After Grendel's demise, Beowulf's heroic status is confirmed within both himself and all of Hrothgar's kingdom. Another battle brings more boasting and vowing. His confidence in his vow to again defend Hrothgar's people against another monster is affirmed with Unferth's gift. This male-to-male interaction is a cycle of confidence and crisis.
2. Warrior of Two Kingdoms: Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Hygelac

Within the story of *Beowulf*, Hrothgar (king of the Danes) and Hygelac (king of the Geats) play distinct personality roles. Hrothgar's kingdom is in great peril because of Grendel and his mother, and Beowulf's appearance gives Heorot hope and a presence in which to have faith. Hygelac, on the other hand, is the king of Beowulf's homeland and is simply concerned about Beowulf's safe return. Although the retelling of Beowulf's accomplishments in the land of the Danes is of interest to Hygelac, having a fine warrior to guard his land is of greater concern. Although each king has a specific role as outlined by the *Beowulf*-poet, they also play underlying roles with vital importance to Beowulf, and only Beowulf.

Because the defense of Hrothgar's kingdom is the central story in the first section of *Beowulf*, it makes sense to begin with Hrothgar. Upon meeting Hrothgar, Beowulf announces his intentions for his journey to the Dane's land. He vows to destroy the beast that has been terrorizing the kingdom. A kingdom under terror will gladly accept the proposal from a savior with a famed past, but one would assume that the leader of these terrorized people would be a bit more discerning in whom he placed his undying and unconditional trust. Hrothgar, however, does not question or review Beowulf's credentials or past boast-vow-achievement record. Instead he recounts the tale of an old friendship to Wulfgar, his court officer, between himself and Beowulf's father. Hrothgar declares the strength said to be in Beowulf's arm and says that “Holy God / has, in His goodness, guided him here / to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel” (lines 381-383). Wulfgar is sent to bid the visitors enter and be welcomed. From the past acquaintance with Beowulf's relatives as well as the his knowledge of Beowulf's great
strength, Hrothgar seems to already have complete faith in Beowulf. This is quite interesting considering what we learn of Beowulf's childhood later in the tale.

Once Beowulf has returned to the Geats and traded gifts with Hygelac and Hygd, we become aware of his past childhood shortcomings. The *Beowulf*-poet writes,

> He had been poorly regarded
for a long time, was taken by the Geats
for less than he was worth: and their lord too
had never much esteemed him the mead-hall.

They firmly believed that he lacked force,
that the prince was a weakling; but presently
every affront to his deserving was reversed. (lines 2183-2189)

Beowulf was the ugly duckling that no one in the kingdom believed would amount to a world-renowned warrior. We also learn that he was fostered out by his father and sent to live with King Hrethel and his three sons, one being Hygelac. Making special note of this last detail sheds new light on just how familiar Hrothgar was with Ecgtheow. Hrothgar's confidence arose from his familiarity with Beowulf's father, yet we are never told if Hrothgar knew Ecgtheow during the time that his son lived with him. This reduces the credibility Hrothgar has with Beowulf's family.

Kemp Malone's “Young Beowulf” recounts this new knowledge of Beowulf's past. He believes that there are three stages in Beowulf's youth that lead up to the battle with Grendel. The first pertains to the reckless boy who competed with Breca. The second stage is of particular importance. During this stage, Beowulf becomes aware of his obligations to God, and refuses to use his strength for
thing trivial; he awaits God's call to service in a great cause. During this stage he falls out of favor at home; his fellows, and even his lord, knowing as they do the greatness of his strength, cannot understand his refusal to use it in the rough and tumble of everyday life in the hall; they attribute his inactivity to sloth and want of spirit. (Malone 23)

Although Malone's analysis of Beowulf's youth is disputed in Eliason's article, “Beowulf's Inglorious Youth,” Beowulf's past is clearly a point of mystery and dispute. Eliason argues that the Beowulf-poet purposely left ambiguity throughout the story and this is one of those sections. Hygelac's youth is called into question rather than Beowulf's, but the lack of clarity leaves the question unanswered.

Readers are now able to question the immediate faith Hrothgar has placed in Beowulf, knowing that Beowulf's past and Hrothgar's knowledge of it are questionable. Regardless of his reasons, Hrothgar trusts Beowulf to bring his people out from under the menace that has been wreaking havoc on Heorot.

Although Hrothgar's mindset is interesting to investigate, the most disturbing fact about Hrothgar's role in Beowulf is not why he trusts the Geat. It is the knowledge that he never once stops to think about the decision he was making for his kingdom. Hrothgar simply sees a chance for his kingdom to be saved and allows Beowulf every courtesy as long as Grendel is defeated and order is once again restored. When Beowulf enters Hrothgar's hall, he imparts to the king every compliment he feels is worthy to the Danish ruler. These pleasantries soon turn serious and hurtful to Hrothgar's kingly ego. Beowulf pleads to Hrothgar saying, “my one request / is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far, / the privilege of purifying Heorot, / with my own men to help me, and nobody
else” (lines 429-432). By stating that no one else will help them fight Grendel, Beowulf is implying that only Geats will be able to defend Heorot. Instead of offering to send his own warriors as support for Beowulf's men, Hrothgar simply sits on his throne and allows the Geat to speak as he wishes. As Irving writes in *Rereading Beowulf*, “Since heroic convention imposes the tightest of identifications between king and people, one might expect that such caustic statements would offend Hrothgar, but in fact they delight him. He cannot regard himself as included in any way in Beowulf's scornful condemnation of his people” (51).

Showing opposition to a savior, as Unferth does, would not be wise when facing an entire kingdom of terrified and vulnerable citizens. In order to retain as peaceful a kingdom as possible, Hrothgar must do what he feels is necessary. In this case, the necessary action is to welcome Beowulf without question and leave Unferth to handle the doubt. Irving also discusses Unferth's role, stating that “Unferth has served well as lightning rod. We might even view Unferth as a projection into a safe area of Hrothgar's real incompetence and failure, drawing Beowulf's justifiable charge while at the same time enabling Hrothgar to preserve his fine façade of effective kingship” (51). Hrothgar is not only acting as the king of the ever-shrinking Danish population but also preventing a revolt from his own people because of his inability to stop Grendel. Using Unferth to voice his doubts and anxieties is the easiest way for Hrothgar to remain in control of his kingdom, solve his problem, and still seem like an honorable king.

Another question often overlooked comes from Hrothgar's words of warning to the newly arrived Beowulf. He says,

> Time and again, when the goblets passed
and seasoned fighters got flushed with beer
they would pledge themselves to protect Heorot
and wait for Grendel with their whetted swords.
But when dawn broke and day crept in
over each empty, blood-spattered bench,
the floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted
would be slick with slaughter. And so they died. (lines 480-487)

Beowulf is not the first to attempt to vanquish the creature. If Hrothgar was so generous
and welcoming to Beowulf to the extent of giving the power and protection of the hall to
the Geat, how can we not assume that the other brave men may have been given the same
treatment if they vowed and boasted as heartily as Beowulf? It would seem to be a wise
political strategy to trust any retainer who claims to be able to defeat a monster. No
matter who the particular warrior may be, the people in Hrothgar's kingdom hear the
chance for the return to normalcy, expect the warrior to succeed in his boast, and any king
would be foolish to not embrace the hero. The question remains whether Hrothgar truly
believes in Beowulf's capabilities or if he is simply following protocol for the newest
warrior willing to risk life and limb for glory.

This male-male interaction is completely opposite of the extremely hostile
Beowulf-Unferth interaction, yet it provokes another interesting observation. Where
Unferth questioned and doubted Beowulf's abilities, Hrothgar offers the support and
unconditional acceptance of Beowulf's boasts and vows. Although the other warriors
don't receive the opportunity to speak their opinion of Beowulf's arrival, it can be safely
assumed that they supported Beowulf as much as, if not more than, Hrothgar. The only
other individuals heard from when Beowulf first arrives are Wulfgar and the watchman on the wall guarding Heorot. After very little discussion with Beowulf, they are overwhelmingly convinced of Beowulf's credentials. They both highly recommend Beowulf to his face and to Hrothgar. These grand convictions and complete trust are intriguingly similar to Hrothgar's sentiments. Hrothgar's attitude and interaction with Beowulf seem to be fairly typical of the male-male interactions observed in Beowulf, except for those with Unferth.

Within the story itself, certain characters converse mainly with Beowulf, Hrothgar, or Hygelac. In fact Hrothgar speaks to few characters other than Beowulf. As Irving points out, “He once addresses the herald Wulfgar, telling him to let Beowulf come into the hall. But he never speaks at all to his wife Wealhtheow; never to his children; never to Unferth, Hrothulf, or any other Dane” (59). One would think that he would have more and better interactions with his subjects and attempt to retain his impeccable role as king. These interactions were either not high priorities for the Beowulf-poet or we are witnessing an important side to the Danish king. Regardless of the reasons for Hrothgar's coldness, his emotional outpouring towards Beowulf is in stark contrast to it. The emotions are quite typical for other male-male interactions but stand out compared to the side of Hrothgar seen throughout the rest of the poem.

Only two exchanges between Beowulf and Hrothgar stand out from the typical confident yet impersonal interaction profile. The first is after Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. Hrothgar is so overwhelmed with gratitude that he attempts to adopt Beowulf and leave him the throne which would pass over Hrothgar's own children (who are too young to inherit the throne at this point in the poem) and nephew. Blood heirs do not
technically need to inherit the throne, but Hrothgar's apparent adoption of Beowulf is a controversial scene. As Michael D. C. Drout says in “Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance System in Beowulf,” “Although critics have been divided as to whether or not Hrothgar's gesture is a true adoption into the lineage or merely a spiritual and social embrace, Wealhtheow, at least, seems to recognize Hrothgar's actions as possessing dynastic implications” (201). Wealhtheow's relationships with Beowulf and Hrothgar will be discussed later, but it is notable at this point to show that Hrothgar lets his emotions for Beowulf show.

Beowulf reciprocates Hrothgar's emotions at only one point in the tale. Moments before the battle with Grendel's mother Beowulf issues a request to Hrothgar:

Wisest of kings, now that I have come
to the point of action, I ask you to recall
what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane
and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall
and suffer death while serving your cause,
would act like a father to me afterward.
If this combat kills me, take care
of my young company, my comrades in arms.
And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,
to send Hygelac the treasures I received. (lines 1474-1483)

It is only in this extreme situation that Beowulf feels the emotional connection to Hrothgar. However, the emotional tie is not between the two men; it is for Beowulf's fellow warriors and Hygelac. The paternal actions do not only help Beowulf. He is
simply trying to protect those whom he knows truly care about him and would be devastated by his death. As John Hill states, “Beowulf would acknowledge Hrothgar's gestures to that extent and in that extremity only. He never acknowledges a closer tie than that of friendly fosterage regarding Hrothgar and a friendship pact regarding the Danes generally” (100). Even when discussing his possible impending death, Beowulf is more concerned with the men in his charge and his lord.

The second instance of Hrothgar's unusually emotional outburst is at the point when Beowulf is leaving Denmark after defeating Grendel's mother. As Beowulf is preparing to leave, “the good and gray-haired Dane, / that highborn king, kissed Beowulf / and embraced his neck, then broke down / in sudden tears. Two forebodings / disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger: / nevermore would they meet each other / face to face” (lines 1870-1876). This final interaction for Hrothgar was exceedingly emotional. It signified the forthcoming end of Hrothgar's reign as well as Beowulf's future inheritance from Hygelac. This one particularly emotional connection brings them as close as any other character would be to Beowulf except for Hygelac.

Hygelac is the second king mentioned in Beowulf. When Beowulf returns home, he is warmly greeted by his king. They discuss Beowulf's travel to the land of the Danes and battles with Grendel and his mother, but Hygelac is more concerned that Beowulf has returned safely than his great adventures protecting Heorot. After Beowulf describes his battles with Grendel and the monster's mother, we learn about Beowulf's supposedly misguided youth and King Hrethel's generosity in accepting Beowulf as one of his own children. Hygelac's interaction with Beowulf is particularly intriguing because their relationship is not that of a typical lord and retainer.
The king of the Geats seems to be positioned in opposition to the king of the Danes, most obviously in that his kingdom is not under attack from brutal, hellish beasts. Beyond this, though, Hygelac is able to play a separate role in Beowulf's life from Hrothgar. Hrothgar is the stranger who offers Beowulf his world in return for killing Grendel and Grendel's mother and saving Heorot. After defeating both of the monsters, Beowulf is bonded with Hrothgar and his court through an informal adoption as well as having been offered the throne. There is status in his achievements, yet his arrival back to Hygelac's court is less about achievement and more about his safe return home. After exchanging pleasantries and gifts, Hygelac tells Beowulf,

Did you help Hrothgar
much in the end? Could you ease the prince
of his well-known troubles? Your undertaking
cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome
of your expedition and pleaded with you
long and hard to leave the killer be,
let the South-Danes settle their own
blood-feud with Grendel. So God be thanked
I am granted this sight of you, safe and sound. (lines 1990-1998)

Hygelac seems to be allowing his parental preference to overtake his cross-kingdom political gains. He knows that King Hrothgar is forever in his debt for allowing Beowulf to eliminate the scourges devastating his kingdom, but Hygelac does not concern himself with debts or advantages. He is simply elated for the return of his warrior.

Also, there must be a reason for the *Beowulf*-poet to include a retelling of the
battle with Grendel in Hygelac's hall that readers must relive again. It is not included to bore readers with the grim details of Grendel's death or to reinforce Beowulf's strength and ability, as the whole poem covers these details. Beowulf and Hygelac already have an extremely personal relationship, but the retelling and the adamant inclusion of the treasures bestowed on Beowulf by Hrothgar bring Beowulf and his king intimately close. He gladly shares his treasure with the king and queen, and, in turn, Hygelac “ordered a gold-chased heirloom of Hrethel's / to be brought in . . . This he laid on Beowulf's lap / and then rewarded him with land as well . . . and a hall and a throne” (lines 2191-2196). Suddenly, we see Beowulf's unfortunate past in a different light. He has reached beyond the unpromising childhood, defeated dangerous monsters with his great strength, and moved himself into position for the inheritance of Hygelac's kingdom. Beowulf will not be offered the throne until Hygelac dies and Hygd becomes doubtful of her son's ability to rule, but the prospect for inheritance is present. Although Hygelac and Beowulf are not as closely bonded as father and son, there is a readily observable bond extending beyond the defeat of monsters or championship in races.

In “The Structure and the Unity of Beowulf,” Arthur G. Brodeur discusses Beowulf's relationship with Hygelac. Although we know that Hygelac and Beowulf are uncle and nephew, their interaction tells of a more deeply bonded relationship. As Brodeur addresses Beowulf's personal relationships, he says that “The most important of all these relationships, from first to last, is that with uncle Hygelac” (1188). Hygelac seems to be a very minor character in the broader scheme of the plot since he only appears in person once, but Beowulf's true feelings for his lord resonate throughout the poem. Statistically speaking, Brodeur has calculated that “Hygelac's name occurs 55 per
cent as often as Beowulf's in Part I, and 69 per cent as often in Part II” (1188-1189).

These are significant percentages considering that the Geatish kingdom has very little to do with the defense of Heorot or Beowulf's involvement.

Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf clearly was the result of his gratitude to the Geatish warrior for returning order and peace to Heorot, but Hygelac has more than pride in his successful warrior. Hygelac's fondness for Beowulf is dependent upon Beowulf's loyalty and continued affection even across the ocean. As Beowulf returns, relates his deeds, and displays his winnings from Hrothgar, there may be a question regarding Beowulf's loyalty. In The Cultural World of Beowulf, John Hill relates that because Beowulf “continues to help the Danes, first avenging Grendel's crimes and then avenging Æschere's death, [it] could mean that in some way he has become Hrothgar's man (as his father did before him)” (104), but Beowulf's conversation with Hygelac and his explanation for his continued service to the Danish court reveals otherwise. Hill further discusses the point, stating that Æschere's kidnapping and death was a most bitter ordeal for Hrothgar, who, Beowulf says, sorrowfully implored Beowulf, by Hygelac's life, to seek the mother and perform a heroic deed . . . Thus Beowulf accounts for the fact of continuing service, deferring it all to Hygelac's name. How, then, when implored in Hygelac's name, could he refuse? . . . Hrothgar, Beowulf says, was good in his customs (good by his promises) but as far as Beowulf's loyalty goes, everything still depends upon Hygelac's kindness. (104)

Beowulf's allegiance to Hygelac is again confirmed when he presents the Hrothgar's gifts to Hygelac. Beowulf proclaims:
Thus the king acted with due custom.
I was paid and recompensed completely,
given full measure and the freedom to choose
from Hrothgar's treasures by Hrothgar himself.
These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present
to you as gifts. It is still upon your grace
that all favor depends. I have few kinsmen
who are close, my king, except for your kind self. (lines 2144-2151)

He also relates the fact that these gifts signify special favor in that they are familial war-
gear passed through the fathers and brothers of his family. Beowulf could easily have
kept all of these grand treasures bestowed on him by Hrothgar and continued to serve in
Hrothgar's court (eventually leading to the rule of Heorot), but Beowulf remains faithful
to his one and only king, Hygelac. As Drout says, “By giving Hrothgar's dynastic gifts to
Hygelac, Beowulf voids Hrothgar's potential inclusion of Beowulf in the Danish
succession... By emphasizing the lineage of the gifts by Hrothgar, Beowulf emphasizes
the extraordinary nature of Hrothgar's offer; his refusal of the offer emphasizes his
extraordinary devotion to Hygelac” (211). Beowulf resists wealth, fame, and kingship to
further his commitment to Hygelac, although he will get these rewards eventually. John
Hill also emphasizes Beowulf's resistance to Hrothgar's gold-adorned political advances,
stating “Beowulf in Heorot, however, accepts Hrothgar's gifts without comment. It is as
though they signify nothing more than the proper munificence of a ring-lord good to his
word and good in his gifts. Beowulf does not even acknowledge their status as part of
Hrothgar's royal patrimony” (100). Beowulf is finally rewarded by the king whose pride
and confidence in him truly matters. Hygelac bestows on Beowulf the gifts of a raised status, Hrethel's sword, and seven thousand hides of land. After Hygelac's death, Hygd will also offer Beowulf the throne. Beowulf's loyalty gains him respect, honor, and fortune.

Readers quickly observe that Beowulf and Hygelac's relationship is more intimate and personal than the relationships with Hrothgar, Unferth, or any other character presented in the poem, especially considering the number of times Hygelac's name is mentioned before audiences ever meet him and Beowulf's cooperation in Heorot in the name of his lord. The Beowulf-poet also insists on affirming Beowulf's intense admiration for Hygelac, upon which Brodeur remarks, “In six of Beowulf's fifteen speeches Hygelac is mentioned tenderly and with deep affection; the poet also several times affirms or strongly suggests their mutual love” (1189). Brodeur also explains that Beowulf's “association with all the other persons of Part I (except, briefly, with Hygd) necessarily terminate with the close of the action of the first part; but his love and loyalty to his uncle rule his heart throughout his life; and Hygelac lives on to the end in both the poet's and Beowulf's recollection” (1190). We do not see this type of affection between any of Hrothgar's subjects, including his wife, nor do we witness any of Hygelac's other subjects or warriors. There is a different type of intense love, one that combines kin and kingdom, between Hygelac and Beowulf which makes their interactions stand out amongst the various conversations and interactions.

Beowulf's homecoming interaction with Hygelac is the extreme opposite of Unferth's first encounter with the hero, yet it is also an outlier in the measurable scheme of typical male-male interactions in Beowulf. The two characters are incredibly close and
share a bond that no other characters have. There may have been other close bonds present around Beowulf, but the poet made the choice to eliminate outlying characters. The Beowulf/Unferth and Beowulf/Hygelac relationships are completely atypical of the male-male interactions presented in *Beowulf*.

Hrothgar, on the other hand, typifies the male-male interactions seen throughout the poem. Beowulf is a stranger in Heorot, yet his celebrity status and monster-vanquishing skills allow his presence to be well-received. Hrothgar's people want him to be a savior, Hrothgar realizes this fact, and Beowulf is treated as an exalted champion by the entire Danish population. As ruler, Hrothgar would be making a poor judgment by rejecting Beowulf's offer or treating him as anything less than superior to any other warrior. Offering Beowulf the throne, however, is a bit extreme. Wealhtheow is fortunately available to provide a much-needed reality check for her husband. She sees Beowulf as a successful warrior, but the continuation her family's possession of the throne is more important than impressing a foreign fighter.
Grendel's Mother: Vicious Villain or Misunderstood Mother?

In her article “The Fall (?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image,” Pat Belanoff says that the traditional Anglo-Saxon poets had an “image of the female: an intelligent, strong-minded, usually glowing or shining, verbally adept woman whose actions are resolute and self-initiated – unless and until, that is, the wars and feuds of men victimize her” (822). When there is a discussion of female characters in *Beowulf*, generally queens like Wealhtheow and Hygd have center stage. There is, however, another powerful female character who has direct contact with Beowulf and is often overlooked. Grendel's mother may have been Heorot's enemy, but she certainly fits the criteria for the classic female image. Where she lacks in glow or shine, she compensates with strength.

Before Grendel is killed, his mother had no need to terrorize Heorot. Then Beowulf arrives, kills her only son, and does not think twice about the pain and suffering he is causing her. Grendel's mother is unable to rely on any outside help for strength or vengeance, so she begins to wreak havoc on those she feels are responsible for the death of her son. When applying the traits Belanoff gives of the female poetic figure, one may ask how Grendel's mother compares to Wealhtheow and Hygd, both of whom perfectly match the description. The monster's mother may not be a peace-weaver or cup-bearer, but she certainly understands that she has enemies and needs to defend herself since she views her son's death as an attack on her life. Although she is not glowing and/or shining, her actions are definitely resolute and self-initiated. She does, however, have a distinct advantage over Wealhtheow and Hygd: physical strength and power.

When Grendel attacks Heorot, Wealhtheow waits for a savior. Beowulf arrives proclaiming he will free Heorot from Grendel's wrath, and Wealhtheow ensures
Beowulf's claims are more than mead-hall boasting. As Belanoff states, “Wealhtheow gives advice, but she also encourages Beowulf to heroism through what she says” (823), yet she does not physically act to protect her kingdom or become a heroine. If Wealhtheow did choose to defend her homeland, it would not be as far-fetched as some would believe. In *Judith*, the heroine of the story, Judith, releases her people from the oppressive hand of Holofernes. She, accompanied by her maid, removes his head and gallantly presents the trophy to her kingdom. Judith was acting to free her people through her actions rather than her words, and she was respected as a powerful queen. Grendel's mother, on the other hand, becomes the defender of her family and mere by attacking Heorot. She could resign herself to the role of victim because of the murder of her son, but she refuses to be further victimized by Beowulf, Hrothgar, and the Danish population. Instead she continues the feud. Grendel's mother is a strong-willed, powerful, resolute female character who has one of the most interesting, *but silent*, interactions with Beowulf.

Because Beowulf attempts to destroy Grendel's mother, his interaction with her is completely atypical of the interactions between men and women found in *Beowulf*. However, it is not unlike the controversial interaction Beowulf has with another male character in the story. When Beowulf arrived in Heorot, he was considered a savior as soon as he announced his intentions. Unferth was the doubter among the crowd who challenged Beowulf's credentials to possibly compensate for his shortcomings as a warrior and his fratricide and became the ostracized nobleman. He was envious of Beowulf's prowess and fame, but the anger stemming from his fellow citizens' admiration overpowered his envy. He is the only character who does not understand the Danes'
instant gratitude for Beowulf especially knowing that others who have attempted killing Grendel have failed. Why should they believe that Beowulf, even with his famed past achievements, would be able to free them from the terror of Grendel's maliciousness?

As it is written, *Beowulf* is a very symmetrical story. There are two kings, two queens, a male enemy, a female enemy, an ambiguously gendered creature (dragon), and many other balances. Acting as female doubter is Grendel's mother. She is already ostracized from the rest of the world and wants to avenge her son's death at the hands of Heorot's great warrior. Like Unferth, Grendel's mother shows that she isn't impressed by Beowulf's past or his famed strength. Beowulf may have been able to overpower Grendel, but Grendel's mother is not going to stand idle while her son's killer is praised. She has nothing left to lose by challenging the warrior, just as Unferth had little to be lost by questioning Beowulf. , she will be the one to physically challenge Beowulf.

Just as critics have argued over the meaning of Unferth's role in Hrothgar's court as *þyle*, so too do they debate how to classify Grendel's mother. Common linguistic methods of classifying the female characters in *Beowulf* can not easily determine Grendel's mother's biggest role in the story. She is a mother, a warrior, a queen in her domain, and a monster, yet it is difficult for readers to see her as anything more than the second creature to terrorize Heorot. Grendel's attack on Heorot was unprovoked and monstrous, but his mother attacked out of revenge. The only reason Beowulf marches against her is to avenge Æschere's death for Hrothgar. If Beowulf feels it necessary to murder Grendel's mother out of retribution, readers should not be as shocked to see Grendel's mother retaliate against the group who killed her kinsman. Readers are never made aware of the male counterpart to Grendel's mother. Without the fatherly figure
present, Grendel's mother has to play many roles for her son. John Hill says, “In a sense, Grendel's mother . . . is wife, queen, lady, and mother all in one for her son. No father is known” (127-128). She also does not have the option to call on a champion to fight in her honor as Hrothgar does with Beowulf. In order to avenge her son, she must act as lord and champion. In this way, she reveals herself to be more civilized and human than a complete monster. As Renée R. Trilling states in “Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again,”

It is, rather, her uncontainability, in contrast to the clearly delimited agentic potentials of the equally maternal Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Modthryth, that sets Grendel's mother apart from them. More important than her maternity or her abjection is the fact that Grendel's mother operates outside of the linguistic economy that underwrites social organization within the poem. (4)

Grendel's mother is defending her son just as a strong father would, but there seems to be a societal problem with this mother's actions. She is not considered a good queen because “the only good mothers are the fathers' queens. Such queens are honoured but they are not what the deep self wants . . . What is wanted, apparently, in malignant feuds is dark joy with the mother at the expense of all rivals when the loaned energies from the father weaken, dependency ends, and regression begins” (128). This psychological issue between Grendel's mother, her son, and Beowulf shows that Grendel's mother is a more complex female character than any other in the story. Beowulf's interaction with her is more than a battle between two opponents. She represents a uniquely close bond between mother and son unseen in other characters' relationships.

The other women in Beowulf's society are active members of the community, but
they do not physically work for change. Pat Belanoff discusses how women in Old English stories achieve the goals they wish of their champions. She cites Wealhtheow's words of wisdom and encouragement which compel Beowulf into heroic action, Elene's succession of speeches threatening her adversaries, and a few others. She also mentions Grendel's mother and how she “relies solely on physical strength” (823) which represents an observed “inverse correlation between a female's use of words and her physical prowess” (823), seen throughout Old English poetry. Concentrating solely on the poem itself, readers readily find many examples of the female use of words that Belanoff discusses. Wealhtheow questions Beowulf in the mead hall to ensure his boastings will become vows, but takes no larger role in the skirmish with Grendel. Hygd welcomes Beowulf back to his homeland and presents him with Hygelac's gifts, but readers do not see her physically take charge of anything in her kingdom. Grendel's mother, on the other hand, does not speak to Beowulf during their battle nor do readers witness her bearing a cup or weaving peace between nations, but she is actively handling her problems. Readers are shown continuously that Grendel's mother is atypical in every aspect of her life, including womanhood and child-rearing. These unconventionalities in her character nicely set the scene for a multi-faceted battle with various interpretations. As Trilling states, the “contrast between the active agency of Grendel's mother and the passive agentic capacities of other women, such as Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and the female mourner at Beowulf's funeral, sharpen the typical heroic dichotomy of words and deeds” (10). Grendel's mother is given the gender distinction of female, but she has broken from this distinction to take on the role of a typical male warrior. She has the emotional responses of a mother but the physical rage and desire for retribution.
experienced by male warriors.

By accepting Hrothgar's challenge to defend Heorot against Grendel's mother, Beowulf has not accounted for Grendel's mother's strength and determination to defend her own kingdom. She is female and therefore considered less of a threat. The *Beowulf*-poet even seems to underestimate Grendel's mother and her love for the only kin she has. The poet writes

Her onslaught was less

only by as much as an amazon warrior's

strength is less than an armed man's

when the hefted sword, its hammered edge

and gleaming blade slathered in blood,

razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet. (lines 1282-1287)

Grendel's mother clearly turns out to be more of a challenge for the mighty Beowulf than anyone expected.

Though every male character in the story doubts Grendel's mother's strength and expects Beowulf to easily defeat her, Beowulf is still followed by a large entourage on his way to the mere. Also, Beowulf decides to use the full course of armored protection against his second opponent. After a long wait for Beowulf's return from the underground battle, most of his followers retreat to Heorot except for his fellow Geats. Here readers begin to see Grendel's mother as an equally fearsome foe to Beowulf as her son. More characters are also seen beginning to doubt Beowulf's boast-to-vow success rate. As Trilling affirms, “We now face an enemy whose weaknesses are repeatedly underscored in the text and whose ferocity is always subordinated to that of her son. Yet
the narrative action of the poem belies this assertion, and her attack, though of less
magnitude, is far more disturbing to the Danes” (11). Beowulf knows that the interaction
he will have with Grendel's mother is not typical for male and female characters, nor is it
a typical battle against any of his foes regardless of gender or species. It seems that
Beowulf is more nervous about facing this monster than he has been with any other foe
because of his intense preparation, the wearing of reliable war gear, and grand boasting.

Beowulf and Grendel's mother are each attempting to avenge the death of an
individual close to them, yet Beowulf sees his fight as more noble than Grendel's
mother's cause. As Hill states, “[Beowulf's] focus is on avenging the death of a friend – a
motive not much removed from her own gallows-mindedness in one sense but levels
apart in another” (127), but because she attacks Heorot in the same manner as her son she
is labeled a monster using male pronouns. Trilling explains that “Neither the narrator nor
the characters can comfortably attach a feminine pronoun to the perpetrator of an attack
on Heorot” (15). The question remains whether they can't attach the feminine pronoun to
her or if they simply won't in order to keep their masculinity intact, especially Beowulf's.
Whether to compensate for Grendel's mother's ambiguity or to convince the audience, the
hero is constantly displaying his manliness while the Beowulf-poet imposes masculine
pronouns and adjectives upon Grendel's mother.

After acknowledging Grendel's mother's diminished threat in comparison to her
son but still thoroughly preparing and dressing for the impending battle with her,
Beowulf has shown that there is something strangely intimidating about this female
character. Trilling describes her character's disruptions in the poem, stating that Grendel's
mother's power has so overwhelmed the men of Heorot and the typical gender
requirements that the representative language of femininity and masculinity (pronouns and adjectives used) has been confused and interrupted. The poet and characters are unsure of how to classify Grendel's mother and her actions. If one uses these disruptions and transfers them to Beowulf's masculine mechanism to cope with having to battle a female opponent, one can easily observe that he is concerned with keeping his masculinity intact to remind himself that he is not simply slaying a helpless female character. Therefore, in the mere Beowulf does not see a female opponent ready to kill him or die trying.

Beowulf's violent interaction with Grendel's mother allows him to de-feminize his opponent and see her as a worthy, or male, opponent. Grendel's mother has now become another Grendel, another male character. Her strength is far too masculine for his image of a female character, and Beowulf does not want to emasculate himself by fighting and possibly dying at the hand of a female. The fact that a woman like Grendel's mother exists “brings categories of identity into question, and the masculine performance of donning armour reassures us as much as it does Beowulf and the Danes” (Trilling 18). Her masculine strength and vigor outweigh her feminine mothering, and Beowulf is able to perceive her as a male opponent. The lack of verbal communication further blurs and confuses the gender distinction in his mind because he is not forced to listen to a mother's cry for retribution.

Communication would seem to be a key ingredient to look for in an interaction between characters, but Beowulf's skirmish with Grendel's mother proves to be deadly and nonverbal. Yet readers are able to use the narration to observe a rare and interesting interaction. Based on the aggressive behavior, the two contenders' intentions are clear but
their mindsets are quite mysterious. Varied and numerous interpretations can be inferred, but words can also prove to be deceiving as with Unferth's flying with Beowulf. Although Unferth is quite vocal with his objections to Beowulf's arrival, the Beowulf-poet reveals Unferth's deepest emotions before he ever speaks. If one only read the dialogue of this encounter, the interpretation of Unferth's vocal reasoning for his dissent versus his mental/emotional reasoning would translate rather differently. The poem says,

> From where he crouched at the king's feet,
> Unferth, a son of Ecglaef's, spoke
> contrary words. Beowulf's coming,
> his sea-braving, made him sick with envy;
> he could not brook or abide the fact
> that anyone else alive under heaven
> might enjoy greater regard than he did. (lines 499-505)

Most will simply pay attention to the dialogue in order to figure out the characters' emotions directly, but there is much to be learned from the nonverbal sentiments shared within the narrative. From these lines readers learn that there is resentment and jealousy brooding in Unferth. Regardless of what Beowulf accomplishes, Unferth will not be satisfied or pleased that the Geatish warrior has arrived in Heorot. This may makes him more objective, or he could be all the more subjective to Beowulf's shortcomings. In comparison, Grendel's mother's desire for vengeance gives her the strength over Beowulf that Grendel lacked. Both Unferth and Grendel's mother have a distinct advantage over the rest of the community: doubt stemming from underlying emotional motives. They are not immediately trusting of outsiders.
Not only is Beowulf defending Heorot and avenging Æschere, but he is also making an attempt to reorganize the social order which Grendel's mother and her questionable femininity have disrupted. Trilling concludes that “women can sometimes be men, and monsters can sometimes be human . . . With Grendel's mother's forceful assertion of an identity that is indeterminate by conventional standards, heroic society itself comes under attack” (17). The fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is more than retribution and heroics. It represents a unique type of interaction using completely nonverbal communication between hero and female enemy. The gender reversal in Beowulf's mind of Grendel's mother brings the interaction to a most confusing level. If readers were told at least one of the character's mindsets, this interaction would be much less controversial and much easier to understand. Unfortunately, this confusion leads to multiple interpretations with the same atypical result. Beowulf and Grendel's mother's meeting is completely unlike the conversations readers are witness to between other male and female characters throughout the poem. The Beowulf-poet must have also been aware that this second battle is much different than Beowulf's first or third battles.

As with most encounters in Beowulf, the fight with Grendel's mother has many different interpretations especially due to the nonverbal nature of their interaction. An additional look at the fight finds readers wondering if, because the two contenders are different genders, perhaps there is a sexual nature to the encounter. Jane Chance's Woman as Hero in Old English Literature discusses this possibility and the poet's emphasis on role reversal, depicting Grendel's mother as both queen, typically a peace-weaver, and hall ruler, typically a king's duty to defend his kingdom. She acknowledges that there are three steps to achieve this resemblance: 1) clutching, grasping, and
embracing, 2) grappling for dominant position, 3) penetrating clothing and body
figuratively akin to the phallus and castration (102). These particular points would be
enhanced and clarified with dialogue, even one character's mental conversation.

To examine the intricacies of the proposed sexual experience of this short
encounter, one must first look at the text itself. The second battle begins with Grendel's
mother sensing “a human / observing her outlandish lair from above. / So she lunged and
clutched and managed to catch him / in her brutal grip; but his body, for all that, /
remained unscathed” (lines 1499-1503). At this point, no one can assume what Grendel's
mother is thinking, and the reader can only believe that she feels threatened. If the
*Beowulf*-poet would have included a snippet of Grendel's mother's inner dialogue,
audiences may begin to see her as less of a monster and more of a mother seeking closure
on her son's death. We are already aware of Beowulf's intentions, but Grendel's mother's
emotions and feelings are a mystery. While this battle could represent a sexual encounter,
readers and scholars will forever debate the innuendos and possibilities. Simple dialogue
could have started to resolve the issue. Acknowledging one character's thoughts on the
situation would help eliminate possibilities for interpretation.

The poem continues as Beowulf makes his first attempt to extinguish the life of
Grendel's mother and battles for dominance. Beowulf realizes the battle has begun and
then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm:

the decorated blade came down ringing
and singing on her head. But he soon found
his battle-torch extinguished; the shining blade
refused to bite. It spared her and failed
the man in his need. (lines 1520-1525)

One could imagine the shock on Beowulf's face as his sword fails to pierce his opponent's flesh. Silence from both sides seems rather unlikely, but the poet fails to acknowledge this fact. Verbal conversation seems much more difficult to misconstrue than subjective narrative text. Where the description of characters' movements is riddled with double entendre, a formal speech or blood-thirsty scream serves a specific purpose without the occasion for a multiple meanings.

To the casual reader the lines of the skirmish do not seem overtly sexual or extraordinary for a battle sequence, but the underlying sexual images become apparent after considering Chance's three steps and realizing that a verbal interaction does not allow for sexual reconsideration. Chance's final step illustrates this point better than either of the other two steps. When the battle begins, Grendel's mother's “savage talons / failed to rip the web of his war-shirt” (lines 1504-1505). Depending on the translator and his/her interpretation, the talon could be replaced with fingers, but this translation makes the scene sexual and savage. Grendel's mother, at one point, has the upper hand during the battle and attempted to avenge the death of her son. As Beowulf regains control of the struggle, he “took a firm hold of the hilt and swung” (line 1564). From the beginning of the encounter to the end, the poem is riddled with covert sexual references that, if closely examined, can lead one to believe that the Beowulf-poet gave more thought to Beowulf's second beastly encounter than previously imagined. It is possible that the lack of dialogue or inner conversation was a deliberate ploy by the poet to make the audience wonder what the relationship between Beowulf and Grendel's mother really was. If interpreted as sexual, Beowulf's interaction with Grendel's mother would clearly be even
further separated from the other interactions seen between men and women in the story. Married couples, especially the kings and queens, are rarely ever seen speaking to one another. Engaging in overt sexuality is unheard of. In this way, Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother is completely atypical of male-female associations in *Beowulf*.

Regardless of the interpretation one chooses to believe regarding Beowulf's second battle, there is definitely a peculiarity about Beowulf's conflict with Grendel's mother as an interaction between a male and female character. There is no verbal interaction, so readers are unclear as to what each character is thinking as death looms in the dank mere. This type of interaction is not seen among any other male and female characters, but one thread sticks out as a commonality among other male-female interactions. The thread is an emphasis to be able to spur male characters into action. It may be against an enemy, such as Wealthow's encouragement for Beowulf to fulfill his boasts; or within the same struggle, such as the fight with Grendel's mother.
4. Wealhtheow and Hygd: The Queens Behind the Kingdoms

As Hrothgar's wife, Queen Wealhtheow shares the same concern for the survival of her Danish kingdom as her husband, yet she is not consulted during the making of any decisions after Beowulf's arrival. This is fairly commonplace since the queen's primary roles in court are peace-weaver and cup-bearer, but Wealhtheow seems to have other plans. In Beowulf, readers only see or hear from Hrothgar's queen a few times, but her words are meaningful especially considering her dialogue as a male-female interaction with Beowulf.

Wealhtheow first appears in the mead-hall before Beowulf's battle with Grendel. She walks in adorned with gold and radiating queenly power. She respectfully passes the cup to King Hrothgar, encouraging him to drink deeply and enjoy his prestige among the ranks. As king, Hrothgar is given as much of a confidence boost as needed especially by his queen, but as Brian McFadden explains in “Sleeping After the Feast: Deathbeds, Marriage Beds, and the Power Structure of Heorot,” there are also indications of an inversion of power. He writes, “Hrothgar's defeat in the hall has feminized the lord, and his later departure in line 664 to seek out Wealhtheow in her quarters suggests that power has moved to the women's quarters” (633). Because Hrothgar was unable to protect his kingdom every time Grendel ravaged Heorot, Wealhtheow acts properly in accordance with courtly manners but her respect for Hrothgar has been lost. Hrothgar is now a diplomat rather than a fierce king.

In addition to praising her husband and homeland warriors, Wealhtheow must also pass the goblet to the Geat. This interaction, as written by the poet, is verbal and physical (she hands Beowulf the cup), but Wealhtheow's portion of the dialogue is not written out.
Audiences only have the opportunity to read Beowulf's boastful response. Before Wealhtheow's entrance, while among his fellow Geats as well as Hrothgar and company, Beowulf had proclaimed he would successfully defeat Grendel, but Wealhtheow clearly needs more than boasting. Her presence and cup-bearing provoke a concise, thoughtful vow from Beowulf to defeat the monster “or meet my death here in the mead-hall” (line 638). As previously discussed, there is a major difference between boasting and vows. Unferth's cruel and demoralizing contesting of Beowulf's strengths and abilities may have temporarily diminished the hopes of the Danes. However, Beowulf is able to gain the upper hand against Unferth's condemnation and renews Heorot's confidence in his boast. Unfortunately, these are simply boasts. It is not until Wealhtheow steps in that Beowulf's vows are evoked. In “Vows, Boasts and Taunts, and the Role of Women in Some Medieval Literature,” Murphy writes that boasts made while drinking in the mead-hall are not taken as seriously as a vow made to royalty. He explains the plot and Wealhtheow's role in this first section of Beowulf, stating:

Beowulf has come into the hall asking permission to grapple with Grendel on the basis of his self-announced past achievements. King Hrothgar is politely diplomatic after this boast recital. At this point, Unferth steps in and provokes from Beowulf another long recital of great achievements, ending with a vow to face and kill Grendel. This almost seems to settle matters. (111-112)

There is, however, no formal acceptance of Beowulf's offer. Wealtheow comes forward and evokes the emotional vow from Beowulf, and the queen is pleased. Murphy continues: “Only now, it seems, is the matter finally settled . . . The commitment that had been provoked by Unferth is now finally confirmed by Waltheow [sic]” (112). Not until
gaining the approval of a female in power does Beowulf's vow gain the strength and the confidence of Heorot. Although Wealhtheow's exhortation to Beowulf seems within the heroic tradition, McFadden points out that there are also political implications. He says that to “place one's trust publicly in anyone but the lord would have been taken as a lack of confidence in the lord, since the poet's heroic ideal proscribes such criticism. In effect, Wealhtheow temporarily selects Beowulf as the new protector of the hall” (634). After Wealhtheow has assured herself that Beowulf's vow is legitimate, she has much more faith in him than in her own husband and king. While male characters, especially kings and warriors, seem to have the greatest amount of power and authority, female characters like Wealhtheow are able to gain control. As Joyce Hill states in “‘Þæt Wæs Geomuru Ides!’ A Female Stereotype Examined,”

> If we now recognize that royal women in history often had considerable power, but that they exercised it through informal channels within the royal household by intrigue and personal influence, it follows that in any context where the warlike activity of men is emphasized and their political maneuverings played down, women will tend to appear less effective than the historical models lead us to expect. (240)

She is able to realize what is best for her kingdom without feeling inadequate as a warrior and leader compared to Beowulf. Without this masculine setback, she is able to encourage Beowulf to action and to place her faith in his abilities unthreatened by his success.

Wealhtheow is not as directly associated with violence as Grendel's villainous mother, but she certainly arouses violence by association. As Helen Damico writes in
Beowulf's Wealthow and the Valkyrie Tradition,

although Wealthow herself does not perform an act of violence, in a sense, by having incited Beowulf to battle (630b), she (like the other female characters) does instigate turbulent and destructive activity. From this perspective, Wealthow's . . . placement in an environment suggestive of unrest and discord somewhat alter[s] the view of the queen as being simply ornamental and considerably increase[s] the gravity of her personality and demeanor. (19)

Readers see Wealthow as a multi-faceted character undertaking the roles of cup-bearer, peace-weaver, queen, and defense leader. Her interactions with Beowulf continue to show that she is willing to extend her political power as far as necessary in order to protect her kingdom, including encouraging and denying the same character at different points during the tale.

After Beowulf disposes of Grendel, he is met in Heorot with a grand celebration and glorious gifts. These lines testify to Hrothgar's generosity in honor of the warrior who has been able to free his kingdom from the ravages of a monster. He is overwhelmed with happiness and offers, in addition to many generous gifts, an adoption of Beowulf which would place the hero in direct lineage to the throne.

But now a man,

with the Lord's assistance, has accomplished something

none of us could manage before now

for all our efforts . . .

.............................................

So now, Beowulf,
I adopt you in my heart as a dear son,
Nourish and maintain this new connection,
you noblest of men; there'll be nothing you'll want for,
no worldly goods that won't be yours. (lines 938-941, 945-949)

This unusual celebratory adoption apparently does not have an effect on the men of the hall as much as it does Wealhtheow. Hrothgar is attempting to bypass both of his sons and his nephew in the lineage of the throne with a foreign warrior, but it is not intentional bypass. Readers are not given the viewpoints of Hrothgar's sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund, or his nephew, Hrothulf, as the Danish throne is almost stripped from their future, but Wealhtheow is fortunately there to reason with the elated king. She says,

The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed
and now the word is that you want to adopt
this warrior as a son. So, while you may,
bask in your fortune, and then bequeath
kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,
before your decease. (lines 1174-1179)

Hrothgar is excited to be rid of Grendel's threat, but he is not considering the future of his family or kingdom. Wealhtheow is gladdened for the relief, but she also realizes that the future of her kingdom is in jeopardy because of Hrothgar. Many critics agree that Wealhtheow's power extends further than the poet actually writes. Damico agrees that Wealhtheow “seeks to influence dynastic succession with her support of Hrothulf as inheritor of the Danish court” (23). Michael D. C. Drout also contends that Wealhtheow “sees the adoption of Beowulf as an action that could damage her sons' chances of
succession, and she does not believe that Hrothgar's offer of synthetic kinship is at all appropriate” (202). John Hill concurs that the queen is “urging Hrothgar not to give away what, strictly considered, is not his to give as dispenser of treasures and gold-lord of warriors – his patrimony, his kingdom, and rule of his people” (101). Clearly, Wealhtheow's first priority is to her people and the lineage of her family. Beowulf is not a blood relative, so his accomplishments are rewarded with the due generosities and nothing more. There are two sons and a nephew that could possibly take the throne, and the closest she feels Beowulf will come to inheriting the throne is to sit between her sons in the mead-hall.

Wealhtheow encourages Beowulf during the plight of Grendel's reign and denies Beowulf the adoption Hrothgar had previously offered. There is a clear business relationship visible through their interactions. Beowulf has accepted the task of defeating Grendel and expects payment upon delivery of the evidence of Grendel's death. Wealhtheow's final words of the poem echo this sentiment:

Treat my sons
with tender care, be strong and kind.
Here each comrade is true to the other,
loyal to the lord, loving in spirit.
The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready:
having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid. (lines 1226-1231)

As Damico explains, “The reciprocity of the gift-giving, as well as the nature of the gifts themselves – military equipment – are reminiscent of the exchange of māđum 'treasure' between a lord and his thane at the end of a military enterprise” (24). Hrothgar views
Beowulf as an adopted son, whereas Wealhtheow is simply trying to complete a business interaction with the Geatish warrior. Although in the beginning it seems like Wealhtheow prizes Beowulf's presence as a leader more than Hrothgar, readers eventually come to understand that she is solely concerned with the continuation of her family's leadership in Heorot.

Wealhtheow may not have wanted Beowulf to be the successor to the throne, but another queen presented in the poem believes in Beowulf's ruling ability. Hygd, wife of King Hygelac and first woman encountered after the defeat of Grendel's mother, is a minor character in *Beowulf* but has an important social interaction with Beowulf. After his return from Hrothgar's kingdom, Beowulf presents the golden treasures bestowed upon him for the defeat of Grendel and Grendel's mother to the king and queen. They already believe in Beowulf as a warrior and see that his allegiance is to the Geats. When Hygelac is killed in the raid on Frisia, Hygd now has the responsibility to govern Hygelac's kingdom. Rather than allow her son to ascend to the throne, Hygd bypasses Heardred and offers Beowulf rule over the Geats. This is the second attempt by royalty to enlist Beowulf as ruler of a kingdom.

Hrothgar's offer of adoption and implication of reign after Grendel's death is an exuberant display of gratitude resulting in a near bypass of Hrothgar's sons and nephews. If not for Wealhtheow's quick, rational objection, Heorot may not have continued with Danish rulers. Although she appreciates Beowulf's success in destroying Grendel, she knows that the throne needs to remain in her family rather than under foreign control. Hygd is also confident in Beowulf's ability to rule, but her gift of the Geatish throne is neither exuberant nor written out in the *Beowulf* manuscript. After Beowulf's return from
Denmark, Hygelac raids Frisia. In this raid, Hygelac is killed, and Beowulf barely escapes death. Beowulf swims back to his homeland from Friesland without his king, presents himself to Hygd, and she

offered him throne and authority
as lord of the ring-hoard; with Hygelac dead,
she had no belief in her son's ability
to defend their homeland against foreign invaders.

Yet there was no way the weakened nation
could get Beowulf to give in and agree
to be elevated over Heardred as his lord
or to undertake the office of kingship.

But he did provide support for the prince,
honored and minded him until he matured
as the ruler of Geatland. (lines 2369-2378)

Although this is a major decision for Hygd, readers are not given the opportunity to see how Hygd spoke to Beowulf or any ornate speeches she may have delivered in his honor. This eleven-line narrative of the event should not be substituted for the probably elaborate address given in order to influence Beowulf, but it, unfortunately, is. Hill confirms that covering Hygd's offer in a very short section of poetic verse “puts her firmly on the sidelines, highlighting the difference between male and female roles” (240). Fortunately, each of Wealhtheow's speeches is recorded but those whom she addresses do not reply to her directly. Hrothgar is spoken to or Wealhtheow simply returns to her seat next to the king. Hygd is not even given this much respect, but this short nonverbal
interaction can be examined in a similar manner as the interaction between Beowulf and Grendel's mother.

As seen with Grendel's mother, a nonverbal interaction or a completely narrative interaction still yields important information pertaining to male-female interactions. It is apparent that Hygd and Beowulf do speak to one another as she offers him Hygelac's throne, but it is difficult to assume her tone or attitude. It can only be assumed that she is hopeful and confident in Beowulf. Wealhtheow's presence and cup-bearing after Grendel's death are a representation of the peaceful mother and royal figure. After Grendel's mother is killed and Beowulf returns to Geatland, Hygd appears. She is also a peace-weaving mother and queen whose sole concern is for her kingdom. As Chance points out, Hygd's presence "stresses the role of queen as peace-weaver and cup-passers to preface Beowulf's final narration of the female monster's downfall" (99). Hygd respects Beowulf and believes he possesses the qualities needed to govern her kingdom, even as an advisor to Heardred. However, she, like Wealhtheow, does not have similar sentiments about Beowulf that both Hrothgar and Hygelac shared.

The kings not only believe in Beowulf's abilities as a warrior but also feel he would be an asset to each respective kingdom. Although Hrothgar's confidence in Beowulf proves to be less paternal and more of a gratuitous, politically-advantageous adoption, both kings feel a close bond with Beowulf. Each queen, on the other hand, has confidence in the Geat warrior and is only concerned for her kingdom, but has the opposite view of her husband concerning who should be successor to the throne. Wealhtheow clearly approves of Beowulf and graciously applauds him for his successes, but as Irving states "she is the prophetic insight that Hrothgar lacks" (74). This insight
helps lead to the continuation of her family as throne-holders. She would rather have Hrothgar's nephew take the throne since her sons are too young than have a foreign leader in power. Hygd whole-heartedly approves of Beowulf and his successes, and she also wants to keep the Geatish throne in her family (as Beowulf is Hygelac's nephew, another similarity to the Danish kingdom). Hill elaborates on Hygd's reasoning, saying that she “anticipates trouble when Hygelac is dead if the young Heardred should succeed” (242-243). In her mind, her son is incapable of ruling and Beowulf is the more competent alternative. It seems, however, that her proposal to Beowulf is not necessarily influential. Due to formal court rules, it can be assumed that Beowulf cordially rejects Hygd's offer and continues his role as Geatish warrior/advisor until Heardred is also killed. He would not intentionally bypass the inherited kingship until all descendants to the throne are gone. It is then that Beowulf finally accepts a leadership role. Among the few interactions that Beowulf has with the main female characters in the poem, Hygd is the most representative of typical male-female interactions. Those interactions of which readers are unaware clearly don't matter as much as the ones that stand out such as Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother. Hygd is the representative of those less significant interactions.

Hygd respects and is in awe of Beowulf's strengths and abilities. She would say nothing to oppose or question him, yet her role in this Old English epic is minimal. As Hygelac's wife, she is a respected queen who plays the part of peace-weaver and cup-bearer. She has accepted jewels from another kingdom, rejoiced at the return of her kingdom's famed warrior, and passed over her own son's rightful passage to the throne for Beowulf. Her reaction to his successes are typical, and, unlike the other female
characters who have interactions with Beowulf, she never opposes or challenges him. Wealhtheow is likewise impressed by Beowulf's success in fighting monsters, but she is able to see past the overwhelming gratitude towards Beowulf for relieving them of Grendel's fierce rampages. Although Beowulf would probably be a promising leader, Hrothgar and family are of primary importance to her and the kingdom. She overrides Hrothgar's offer of adoption, challenges her husband's ability to make decisions and govern his own kingdom, and has the power to change a masculine boast into a confirmed vow. No other female character other than the one considered a villain challenges Beowulf in any way. Wealhtheow is as much of an outsider as Grendel's mother, yet she is considered a positive, heroic female character because she is the queen. Clearly, she is an atypical example of male-female interactions in *Beowulf*.

**Intentions Through Interactions**

Character interactions are crucial to the complex understanding of a story's plot and its use of gender roles. Male characters act and speak with one another much differently than they do with female characters. In addition to gender, class also affects the ways in which men and women relate to each other. In this study, I have uncovered unique traits in the characters of *Beowulf* by examining male-male and male-female interactions.

*Beowulf* has been translated, interpreted, analyzed, and discussed for centuries, and each character's role is clearly distinct. Not only are the characters unique but their interactions with one another also deeply impact the poem. Beowulf interacted differently with most major characters but certain interactions were representative of
typical male-male or male-female relationships.

Beowulf's encounters with Unferth, Hrothgar, and Hygelac differ greatly and show how varied Beowulf's interactions were. Unferth's challenge, I believe, surprises Beowulf, yet he respectfully refutes Unferth's version of the Breca engagement and proudly continues his boasting. The kings never doubt Beowulf, and he senses their pride and love for him as a warrior and son. When a female character enters the picture, Beowulf changes his attitude and actions depending on the female. Grendel's mother is the most hostile female Beowulf encounters, and his nonverbal battle displays his contempt towards a monster regardless of gender. When the queens, Wealhtheow and Hygd, speak to or engage the warrior, Beowulf listens to their request, advice, or offer but rarely makes an effort to respond directly to the queen. Beowulf bypasses Wealhtheow (even though she speaks) and addresses Hrothgar. She returns to her seat next to Hrothgar and allows the men to speak, but her words can't be ignored. Hygd, though a minor character, allows Beowulf's future as a king to surface, yet her main priority remains with her kingdom.

These interactions are critically important to analyze while reading *Beowulf* because the characters' true intentions towards one another comprise the story almost as much as the plot. Whether verbal or nonverbal, dialogue or narration, character interactions allow readers to see exactly how each character feels about Beowulf and how he feels toward other characters. Characters deemed villains (like Unferth) may be classified as such unwisely. Similarly, characters often considered weak or powerless (like Hygd or Wealhtheow) truly have more control than the narration leads readers to believe. Investigating characters' natures allows readers to understand them and their
roles beyond the progression of the story.

Within the story of *Beowulf*, there is a complete lack of female-female interaction. It is unwise to assume that women never interacted with one another during Beowulf's visit in Heorot or in his homeland, but they do not enter the poem. Each queen has a daughter but neither plays a major role in the poem. Mothers will converse with their daughters (and sons), but the *Beowulf*-poet may believe audiences shouldn't care about interactions without Beowulf, especially those between two female characters. To completely invest audiences in Beowulf's world, the inclusion of all character interactions regardless of gender would greatly benefit the story and its readers.

Clearly, scholars have studied every character, battle, reference, digression, and innuendo of *Beowulf*, but the characters' interactions must also be closely considered. There are reasons for dialogue and non-verbal interactions other than helping to progress the plot. The poet took time to calculate exactly how each character will speak to the others, so dismissing the importance of language and gender would be an unfortunate decision. Men interact with other men in *Beowulf* using a respect for rank system which, if challenged, can lead to ostracism or villainy. When women and men interact, there is a power struggle between the hero and the strong-willed queens, including Grendel's mother. Each woman encountered in the story embodies all or most of the characteristics Pat Belanoff described as the image of the female: “an intelligent, strong-minded, usually glowing or shining, verbally adept woman whose actions are resolute and self-initiated – unless and until, that is, the wars and feuds of men victimize her” (822). Wealhtheow and Hygd know what is best for each of their kingdoms and voice their concerns whether the men listen or not. Grendel's mother physically asserts her strength and power over the
hero who threatens her kingdom and killed her son.

The type of character analysis seen within this examination is not limited to Beowulf alone. Many other Old English poems and stories could benefit from such scrutiny. The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message are a unique pair of elegies that, if taken as written correspondences between husband and wife, would show that male-female interactions come in many forms and represent a variety of emotions. These elegies show that not all male-female interactions are dominated by powerful males. Another literary piece that can be examined is Judith wherein Judith and her maid save her people from the oppressive hand of Holofernes. In this story, audiences are able to see two women physically interacting and working together. This is very rare. There is no dialogue but the narration helps us to follow their teamwork. An analysis of the interactions between Judith and her maid could yield intriguing information about how medieval women acted when men were not present for protection. Judith was forced to reverse the typical female gender role (seen also in Beowulf with Grendel's mother) in order to escape an attacker, yet she is considered feminine and heroic.

Beowulf is an fascinating tale whose intrigue will never cease. Analyzing the interactions between characters has revealed that characters like Unferth and Grendel's mother are more than one-dimensional villains whose sole purpose is to foil the hero. This exploration has also shown women to be more than peace-weavers and cup-bearers especially when faced with a failing or deceased king. The authors of Beowulf and other Old English works allow their characters to interact for a variety of reasons. These reasons should be carefully examined in order to experience the richness of language and the diversity of human interaction.
Works Cited


