The Masculine Queen of Beowulf
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Recent Beowulf criticism, like most areas of medieval studies, has seen inquiry into female characters and the place of the feminine in the text. Critics in the 1980s like Helen Daničko and Jane Chance focused for the first time specifically on the women in Beowulf; in 1990 Gillian Overing’s Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf brought postmodern gender theory to the poem. These texts and others like them, however, leave intact the equation of women with the feminine and men with the masculine.

This equation is disrupted when the text is read within the rubric of gender performance as determined by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter. Performativity enables a new way of interpreting the characters of Beowulf; specifically, in the world of the poem masculinity is power, most emphatically the power to control the actions of others. The violent queen Medryða illustrates the performative nature of the gender of power and shows that action, rather than biological sex, is the determinant of that gender. Medryða, though female, is ultimately masculine since she wields power in the same way that Beowulf does.

Butler’s Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter clarify the notion of gendered performances that are repeated to the point where they seem natural or inevitable (although they are neither). Butler says that performance, not biology, determines gender: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Trouble 25). In Bodies that Matter, Butler expands upon this notion of performativity, which, she emphasizes, is not a subjective, conscious “choice” by an already essentialist, humanist “self.” In Bodies, Butler corrects misperceptions by readers of Trouble, stating that by “performativity” she did not mean that

...one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. (Bodies x)

Rather than the subject deciding its gender, “gender is part of what decides the subject” (Bodies x). One cannot precede the other in some sort of linear progression. Genders are not constructed onto pre-existing sexes bodies; gender construction is not an act that can be deemed “finished” at a certain point (Bodies 9). The performativity of gender depends on an understanding of gender construction as an ongoing process (or performance) that is never ultimately complete.

That ongoing process depends on repetition and reinscription of “norms” of gender. Butler’s arguments about the materiality of the body insist upon “the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Bodies 2). As such, what humanity has traditionally perceived as “the sexes” are, for Butler, actually “normative positions” (Bodies 14). Such a position takes its place in a “citation” of previous performances, so that performances layer one upon another to posit an illusion of determined sex. For Butler, “Performativity is not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a repetition of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (Bodies 12). While she is most interested in female and feminine performances, citations, and repetitions, Butler also briefly inquires into racial and racist performance (Bodies 18).

Butler’s main goal, if that term is not too teleological for such a philosopher, is examination of examples of “disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized” (Bodies 4); for her, it is those sites of disidentification that serve to undermine what she calls “the heterosexuality imperative” (Bodies 2), “the regime of heterosexuality” (Bodies 15), or “compulsory heterosexuality” (Trouble viii) that reigns in contemporary Western culture. As such, norms of gender construction may seem inflexible when they are defined as “the repeated stylization of the body” (Trouble 33); yet disidentification, or slippage from those norms, is what reveals their very un-natural constructedness and provides ways to challenge those norms. Such an “enabling disruption” overlooks or resists citations of the norm, and refuses to cite such a norm, insisting on a performance without precedent.

Such performativity affords a new way of looking at the “evil queen” of Beowulf, Medryða, and watching her disruptive gender performance. Although Overing’s discussion of gender in Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf ultimately focuses on women and the feminine, her discussion of the “masculine economy” of Beowulf provides entree into my analysis of Medryða as a figure who wields power to enact a masculine performance. In Overing’s terms:

In the masculine economy of the poem, desire expresses itself as desire for the other, as a continual process of subjugation and appropriation of the other. The code of vengeance and the heroic choice demand above all a resolution of opposing elements, a decision must always be made. (70, italics Overing’s)

For Overing, masculinity in Beowulf entails dominance and resolution; no ambiguity of hierarchy, of gender, of decision, is permissible. She continues:

A psychoanalytic understanding of desire as deferred death, of the symbolic nature of desire in action, is often not necessary in Beowulf; death is
continually present, always in the poem’s foreground: the hero says “I will do this or I will die.” Resolution, choice, satisfaction of desire frequently mean literal death. (70)

Men in Beowulf, for Overing, live in a world of absolutes: they will fight the monsters or die, they will avenge a death or die. Overing reads Beowulf himself to test this absolute assertion, but acknowledges that the absolute resolution is intact even at the end of the poem. The masculine characters define themselves against an unfavorable Other: men are strong, noble, generous; the Other is weak, ignoble, miserly—and might as well be dead, for within the masculine economy of this poem, those attributes have no value. Within the terms of Overing’s analysis, Moddryðo is masculine; she forces an acknowledgment that masculinity is not “natural” but constructed, since a woman can say, “I will do this or I will die.”

After surveying critical views of Moddryðo and her role, I will examine two words, mundgripe and handgwerpypene, which reveal Moddryðo’s lexical association with Beowulf and show that she cannot merely be dismissed as an evil queen who becomes good after marrying the right man. She is neither a reformed peace pledge nor a heroic Valkyrie. Instead, her character both confirms and denies a masculine economy that depends on women as commodities. In the terms described in Luce Irigaray’s Women on the Market, Moddryðo’s masculine performance manages to subvert the usual use of women as objects in exchanges between men.

The brief episode in question tells the story of Moddryðo’s actions before and after her marriage to Offa; it appears abruptly in the text after a description of the Geat queen Hygd. (Please see complete text with translation following the notes).1 Unlike Hygd, Moddryðo was not initially good, wise, and generous, a model queen; the men who dare to look upon her in her father’s hall are put to death. She “reforms,” however, after her marriage to Offa, and the poet ends the brief section of narrative with praise of her that eventually turns into praise of her husband and son.

Critics have tended to view this story of Moddryðo only within the larger context of the poem, usually reading Moddryðo as a foil to Hygd, Higelac’s queen, who is described as a good queen, young, beautiful, wise, and generous in the lines leading up to the Moddryðo episode (1925-1931). In contrast, Moddryðo orders men who dare to look on her to be killed (1933-1940). However, after her marriage to Offa, Moddryðo changes to become like Hygd, generous, loved, and fertile: a good queen who managed to overcome her wicked tendencies.2

A different “explanation” of the episode is patristic and reads the Moddryðo story as a Christian allegory, with Offa as Christ the bridegroom, to whom Moddryðo submits and finds happiness much like the good Christian does in submission to Christ.3 Masculinist readings view the Moddryðo episode as a triumph, within the context of the poem, of the right, “natural” order of male over female, focusing on the “tamed shrew” aspect of the passage and revealing the critical desires of their authors to naturalize male domination of women, at least in the world of the text.4

Another focus of formalist critics is the abrupt transition to the Moddryðo story. In order to show the passage’s stylistic similarity to the rest of the poem, critics have sought other points in Beowulf at which the subject matter swings suddenly from one narrative to another without warning.5 Similarly, Klaeber and others fit the “diggerson” into a moral vision of the poem wherein the story of Moddryðo is an opportunity for the poet to make a moral exemplum like others in the poem.6

Moddryðo’s name, her very existence, and possible historical precedents for her have provoked considerable critical discussion. The crux “moddryðo weag” (L1931) can be read to include or not to include a name; if there is a name, it can be read as Moddryðo or as Dryðo. Historical critics, who stress the documented precedents for a number of the characters in Beowulf, search for Moddryðo among a number of candidates, who include the violent and exiled Queen Drida; Cynéþryð, the notoriously cruel wife of Offa II; and Heremethruda, a Scottish queen who has a minor part in Saxo Grammaticus’ story of Amleth.7 This sort of thematic, structural, moral, or historical analysis illustrates Overing’s postmodern contention about criticism of the Moddryðo passage, that “a place is found for the unmannery queen in the larger context of the poem, one that connects, and assimilates her through opposition” (102). The political aims of feminist critics are quite different from those of the traditional (mostly male) critics discussed above, but feminists, with the notable exception of Overing, also tend to shape Moddryðo and her story into a unified vision of Woman, be it in Beowulf, Old English Literature, or Anglo-Saxon culture at large, to “explain her.”8

Moddryðo does act as a foil to Hygd and historical precedents for her character do exist. However, two distinctive if ambiguous words in the Moddryðo passage reveal a Moddryðo who is not so easily subsumed into patterns of the poem or of Old English literature that most critics present. These words, mundgripe (1938) and handgwerpypene (1937), link Moddryðo with Beowulf in such a way that the categories of good and evil, masculine and feminine, become much harder to distinguish. Although lexically she is linked to the hero, the narrator tells us that she performed criminal acts (firen ondrystne, 1932). She deprives beloved men (leofhe mannan 1943) of life, but she is an excellent queen of the people (fremu folces ewen 1932).9 It seems that even the poet cannot quite make up his mind about her.

Moddryðo’s strongest lexical links with Beowulf appear in lines 1937 and 1938, handgwerpypene and mundgripe, literally translated as “twisted by hand” and “handgrip.” Handgwerpypene describes a deadly bond, wælþende (11936). Klaeber says handgwerpypene “seems to be meant figuratively” (199), since Moddryðo probably manipulated the events “by hand” and did not literally

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forge deadly bonds. However, the other two uses of forms of *wrípan* in the poem are decidedly literal: in 1.963-4 Beowulf literally twists Grendel to his deathbed (*íc hreðlice heardan clamnum / on wældece wrípan þohte*) and in 1.2982 the Geats, presumably including Beowulf, bind up the wounds and the corpses on the Swedish and Geatish battlefield (*Da waron monige, þe his mag wríden*).

Here, forms of *wrípan* associate Modðryðo with Beowulf in instances where he is heroic (conquering Grendel, assisting his wounded comrades) and she is evil. Of course words have different connotations in different narratives, but the lexical association with the hero and his actions questions two usual critical assumptions: first, of Modðryðo’s all-encompassing evil and, second, of a figurative translation of *handgewripenes*. Since Beowulf the noble hero is also associated with forms of *wrípan*, the use of the word in the Modðryðo passage clouds a reading of her as a pure termagent. The other uses in the poem are literal; why must the word be translated figuratively here? Modðryðo, the queen with the ambiguous motives and character, could indeed forge or twist deadly bonds: literally put the men to death herself.

A similar problem with literal and figurative translations arises with the other word that associates Modðryðo and Beowulf: *mundgripe* (1.1938), both a clear link from Modðryðo to Beowulf and one of the most ambiguous words in the section. *Mundgripe* occurs only in Beowulf (Venezky, fiche M023, 164); there are no other usages in the Old English corpus that might guide us to a wider interpretation of the word. Beowulf is the only other character in the poem associated with *mundgripe*, twice in the fight with Grendel and once in the fight with Grendel’s mother.

1.379-81: *he prītigesamma magencraft on his mundgripe hæþorf hæbbe* (Beowulf has the strength of 30 men in his handgrip)

1.751-3: *he ne mette middangearde, eopan sceata on elran men mundgripæ maran* (Grendel has not met any man with a stronger handgrip than Beowulf)

1.1533-4: *strengæ getrouwde, mundgripæ magenes* (Beowulf rejects Hunding for handgrip in the fight with Grendel’s mother)

While it is easy to translate *mundgripe* in these instances, scholars have had much more trouble with it in relation to Modðryðo. Klaeber says that it could be “an allusion to a fight between maiden (or father) and suitor” (199) but prefers instead to translate it as “seized” or “arrested.” Similarly, Constance Hieatt refers to it as “the method she uses, *presumably by proxy*, to pin down her victims” (177, italics mine); Jane Chance translates *mundgripe* as “arrest” (105), Helen Damico as “hand-seize” (46). If there is bodily contact, Klaeber suggests maybe the father is involved (though he gives no reason at all for this speculation); Hieatt assumes that Modðryðo would not engage in physical contact with the men who dared to look at her.

Perhaps they do not want to think of actual contact between Modðryðo and her suitors. Even though the word is literal in reference to Beowulf the hero and his good deeds, it is assumed to be figurative when referring to a woman and her bad deeds. Hieatt does remark on the link between Modðryðo and Beowulf through the word:

Elsewhere, this word is associated with Beowulf alone, and its use here may be an indication of the misuse of strength and power in contrast to Beowulf’s own exemplary use, recalling the contrast between Beowulf and Heremod. (177)

Contrast or no, *mundgripe* associates Modðryðo with the hero just as *wrípan* does, and those associations suggest—but do not confirm—literal uses of the word in the Modðryðo story as well.

And what is the story of Modðryðo? The associations of these two words (which link Modðryðo to Beowulf) enable us to acknowledge and play with ambiguities rather than to resolve or eliminate them. Is Modðryðo really evil? did she wrestle with men? did her father pack her off to Offa? does she illustrate an antitype of peace weaver? is she an Eve figure who becomes a Mary figure? The ambiguities in the text show that Modðryðo cannot be dismissed as simply another example, albeit extreme, of a tamed shrew.

This ambiguity surrounding Modðryðo forces an examination of the construction of gender in the poem. After all, the usual assumption of Modðryðo’s wickedness is that she has repudiated the conventional female role of passive peacemaker and taken matters of violence, best left to men, into her own hands. The traditional view of the passive peace pledge complements the traditional view of the active hero in this male/female opposition. Within this opposition, power belongs to the masculine. Except for Modðryðo, only men have the power of violence and the power of wealth in the social systems described in Beowulf. Overing points out that “female failure is built into this system” since women “embody . . . peace, in a culture where war and death are privileged values” (82).

Men have the opportunity to succeed, while the most a woman can hope for is to delay the inevitable war and failure of her role as peace weaver. However, for Overing this tidy opposition of active, warlike man/ passive, peaceful woman is actually disrupted by the feminine, which drives a “wedge of ambiguity and paradox” into the neat pairs (xxiii). While Overing discusses the other female characters in the poem as well, she highlights Modðryðo because “she escapes, however briefly, the trap of binary definition” (108).

Modðryðo, in the first half of her story—and in the second half, though less obviously—only not disrupts the construction of gender in the poem but manages to take control of it briefly. This control both comes from and produces the power she wields. Modðryðo has the ultimate

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power, that of life and death, over the men in her hall. This power is masculine in terms of the gender construction of the text; those who wield power are men, like Beowulf or Higelac, and those who are completely powerless are women, like Hildeburh or Freawaru. Although Hieatt thinks that Modpřyðó's linguistic associations with Beowulf serve as a contrast involving the use and misuse of power, Modpřyðó's lexical associations with Beowulf underscore the masculinity of her actions. Because she is wielding power as she arranges the deaths of the men who have offended her, she is constructing her gender, and that gender, within the terms of the poem, is masculine. Modpřyðó is making an absolute, masculine statement, in Overing's terms, but with an interesting twist: You will not look at me or you will die.

As I noted earlier, Butler says that the construction of gender is an ongoing, repetitive, and circular process that builds upon itself: "Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (Trouble 17). In these terms, it is usual to assume that Modpřyðó is evil (as Hieatt does) since she is acting against the usual assumptions about females in Anglo-Saxon literature (and perhaps in late twentieth century Western culture as well). Butler remarks that To the extent that the "I" is secured by its sexed position, this "I" and its position can be secured only by being repeatedly assumed, whereby "assumption" is not a singular act or event, but, rather, an iterative practice" (Bodies 108, emphasis Butler's).

Butler also emphasizes that gender is constructed by the discourse that contains it. To use Butler's examples, "the feminine" refers to very different ideas in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig or, more strikingly, of Plato and Luce Irigaray. Simply because Anglo-Saxon scholars have always discussed the feminine gender in terms of passive peace pledges and a Mary/Eve opposition is no reason to continue to do so. We can view Modpřyðó's gender as masculine, a gender she has the power to construct on her own. As Butler says, "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Trouble 25). Modpřyðó's assumed and repeated performances, her citations (to use Butler's terms), are masculine.

To say that Modpřyðó has constructed a masculine gender for herself is to say that she acts, within the textually constructed world of Beowulf, like a man. To borrow a phrase from Allen Frantzen, Modpřyðó is a "manly woman" because her actions, her performances within the text, are masculine (460). Butler says, "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Trouble 136). Viewed in this light, Modpřyðó's gender is determined not by the author calling her a cwén, a queen (a noun feminine in grammatical gender as well definition),[11] but by her violent, authoritative, and powerful action.

While critics have not wanted to consider the possibility of literal contact between Modpřyðó and men, a masculine construction of gender allows, even encourages that interpretation. If Modpřyðó is masculine, why should she not attach wætendice (deadly bonds) to those who have offended her, literally put them in chains with her own hands? This would not be a feminine action, according to the text's definition of femininity. But I read Modpřyðó to construct her own gender, to assume power that is unfeminine within the context of the poem. In doing so, she "reveals a trace of something that we know cannot exist in the world of the poem: the trace of a woman signifying in her own right" (Overing 106). To achieve power, Modpřyðó has had to assume the masculine gender, for her society does not permit the feminine to put offenders in chains and cut their heads off.

The culture of the poem defines Modpřyðó by her biological sex, sees her as feminine; her assumption of the masculine gender defines her deeds as firen ondryste, a terrible crime in her society. The ambiguity of her gender and her sex seeps into the poet's narrative. Modpřyðó is evil but also fremu (excellent); she performs leodbealwe (harms to people) but is also aenelicu (peerless). The poet cannot condemn her completely with his language, though he sometimes presents her (and critics have read her) as an example of a bad woman.

Indeed, in the beginning of her story Modpřyðó is a bad woman if considered within the gender-related values determined in the larger framework of the poem. Modpřyðó does not even have a legitimate reason, in masculine terms, for killing the gazers, because she is not avenging the death of a kinsman. For Modpřyðó, there is no reliance on "the familiar and familial vengeance code that pervades the poem" (Overing 105); although her actions show a masculine gender, the motives behind them do not. This sexual ambiguity (of her body, of her actions, of her intentions, of the language used to describe her) is too much for the narrative to bear, and Modpřyðó, after 13 lines of disruption (1931-1944), seems to settle down into a more obviously feminine gender. She has disrupted the masculine economy, the binary definition of gender, on which the poem and its culture depend.

That economy is one that depends on women being defined as commodities to be traded between and passed among men. In "Women on the Market," Irigaray states that "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (170). Butler has noted Irigaray's propensity to cite her philosopher-fathers not as "simple reiterations of the original, but as an insubordination" (Bodies 45). Irigaray's analysis of a male-based economy predicated on female exchange enacts Butler's claims that she cites insubordinately; in this essay, Irigaray reveals and insists upon the necessity of female exchange between men to what Butler would term the phallogocentric, heterosexual economy. While Anglo-Saxon England or early medieval Scandinavia may not be "the society we know," it is markedly similar in that an even more obvious
exchange of women formed its basis. Freawaru and Hildeburh are traded like commodities to their families’ enemies to buy an alliance, a tenuous peace. Irigaray says, “Woman has value only in that she can be exchanged” (176, italics hers); a woman is not an independent, signifying subject. Irigaray could be counseling Hroðgar when she says, “Wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men” (172). Hroðgar’s wife, Wealtheow, his daughter, Freawaru, and his unnamed sister (“Healfdane’s daughter”) are all products in the masculine peace-pledge economy, traded for political alliance. Overing points out that women in Beowulf are so thoroughly objectified that most of them do not have names: of the eleven women in the poem, only five are named (Wealtheow, Freawaru, Hildis, Hildeburh, Modrýðo); the rest remain nameless (the old woman at Beowulf’s funeral) or are defined simply as a man’s wife, mother, or daughter (73).

Irigaray points out that within this masculine economy a woman is worthless unless at least two men are interested in exchanging her (181). Modrýðo’s marriage could be viewed in this light; she goes to Offa’s hall be fæder lare, by father-counsel (1950). Lare could be translated here to mean an order of her father rather than advice;12 Modrýðo seems to acquiesce to the masculine economy that defines her society and thus is exchanged between two men. In Irigaray’s terms, Modrýðo could be read to have subscribed to society’s version of normal womanhood, “a development that amounts, for the feminine, to subordination to the forms and laws of masculine activity” (187).

However, Modrýðo does rebel against this economy, especially in the first half of her story, when she performs within the masculine gender. Within the first thirteen lines of her narrative, she refuses to become a commodity like those defined in Irigaray’s essay. Overing emphasizes that Modrýðo will not allow the men in the hall—presumably potential husbands—to gaze at her. While most women are commodities, “the gold-ornamented queens who circulate among the warriors as visible treasure” (Overing 104), Modrýðo refuses to become one. “At the center of Modrýðo’s rebellion is her refusal to be looked at, to become an object” (Overing 103). While Overing attributes Modrýðo’s rebellion to her momentary disruption of the social and textual structures of Beowulf, I prefer to interpret Modrýðo more specifically as an active subject who has constructed her own gender. Her masculine gender both allows and forces her to be an active subject; thus, she cannot be an object. Modrýðo has the power to rebel, to refuse, since she has assumed the masculine gender.

Her refusal of commodification points even more strongly to literal readings of handgæwriðene and mundgrípe; the implications of bodily contact show the physical nature of the way the men wanted to view her and she refused to be viewed. Since Modrýðo performs within a masculine gender, we can now read the passage as a story of a queen who bound and decapitated with her own hands those men who offended her.

The literal translation of mundgrípe allows even another interpretation of the story, and I wish to allow for a multiplicity of interpretations and acknowledge that version as well. While all critics assume that the mundgrípe is probably figurative (even Overing translates it as “seizure” (104)) and either Modrýðo’s or her father’s, I would argue that the mundgrípe is not only literal but could be the offending man’s. This interpretation calls for a translation of after (after mundgrípe, 1.1938) as “on account of” or “because of”: because of an actual physical handgrip (a man touching or grasping this powerful woman), the sword was appointed. In this reading, Modrýðo has the power to refuse to be touched as well as looked at, which in Irigaray’s terms rejects both the culture’s definitions and commodifications of women. Irigaray says that women has two bodies, “her natural body and her socially valued, exchangeable body” (180); in this version of the story, Modrýðo will not allow the men to touch her natural body nor to look at her as “visible treasure” to be socially exchanged.

The poet does not see the situation as a woman asserting her right not to be looked at and possibly touched; he refers to the men’s actions as “pretended injury” (ligetorne, 1.1943). Ligateorne is unique in Old English to Modrýðo’s story (Venezky, fiche L011, 201); the narrator needs an unusual word, a compound of “lie” and “trouble” to emphasize that the actions of men concerning women’s bodies are not injuries in the terms of the culture to which the men are accustomed.13 Critics have tended to agree with the poet that these injuries are pretended; Edward Irving says “it is evident that these men are innocent victims of her accusations” (73). Evident? To whom? Perhaps to another man, within or without the text, who sees nothing wrong with examining the possible merchandise, as it were. Herein lies Modrýðo’s ultimate disruption: she refuses to agree that the actions of the men are ligetorne and wields her power to punish the offenders.

However, it is generally agreed that Modrýðo changes into a more conventional Anglo-Saxon woman upon her marriage to Offa. Since she has been given to Offa, the poet tells us, the ale drinkers tell a different story; Modrýðo lives well on the throne, good and famous, loving her husband (l.1945-1953). Traditional critics call her change a reform: Modrýðo has become more like Hygd, the traditional gold-ornamented queen. Feminist critics seem a bit saddened by the passing of the man-killer and the assumption of the traditional role; even Overing says that Modrýðo rebels against but does not conquer the masculine symbolic order (105). Overing attributes her “reformed wife personality” to the flaw in her rebellion, namely that “the violent form of her rebellion confronts the system on its own death-centered terms” (105). However, I want to argue that Modrýðo not only disrupts the masculine symbolic order but continues to rebel against it even after her disappearance from her own story.

It is easy to see Modrýðo as a conventional woman, silent and passive at the end of her story. The traditional

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view sees Modhyðo sent to Offa be fader-lare as a gold-adorned peace pledge. After three and half lines (1951b-1954) praising her as a good, traditional queen, the poet moves on to praise her husband and does not mention Modhyðo again. She has disappeared from a story which is supposedly hers. Her body disappears as well as her name; her son Eomer is born not from her but from hponon (L.1960), from him, i.e. from Offa. There is no need to mention the passive woman who does her duty as gold-adorned, fertile queen.

However, after her marriage to Offa, Modhyðo may not be the conventional gold-adorned queen that she seems to be on the surface. Close examination of the description of her life at Offa’s court shows her unconventionality in a continued “rebellion” against the binary oppositions that defined her as virago and now as passive peace weaver. First of all, although she went be fader lare, she gesohite, sought, Offa’s hall. I choose to translate lare as “advice,” without the authority-laden translation of “order,”14 so that considering advice from her father, Modhyðo actively sought (journeyed to) Offa’s hall. Once there, she is in gunstole, on the throne, not walking among the warriors serving them drink; the tableaux shows her in the place of power, not in the position of servitude.15 She is described as mare (famous) in line 1952, an adjective normally reserved for (male) heroes.16 These words all hint that Modhyðo is not the typical queen the critics have taken her to be after her marriage.

Most important, however, is her success in marriage. Modhyðo rebels against the system by succeeding in its terms, terms that are (as Overing points out) set up to ensure women’s failure within patriarchal society.17 In a society that values war, killing, violence, and glory in battle, the peace-weaver actually strives against everything the society values. The other women in Beowulf, as numerous critics have noted, fail, as indeed they are destined to do. Wealthow fails to prevent her nephew Hroðulf from killing her sons and taking the kingship; Hygelc’s husband Higelac dies in a feud with the Frisians; Beowulf tells us how Freawaru will fail as a peace-pledge between the Hothobards and the Danes; Hildeburh loses her brother, son, and husband in the wars she could not prevent as peace pledge between the Frisians and the Half-Danes. All of these “conventional” women adhere to the role their society has determined is appropriate for them; all succumb to the failure built into that role.

The cornerstone of Modhyðo’s unconventionality is her success in the role in which the others fail. She resists and disrupts the system both before and after her marriage. We have no sure evidence that Modhyðo was actually a peace-pledge. The text refers to her as a freðuweahbe, peace-weaver, but this reference occurs before her marriage, when she is depriving beloved men of life (II.1942-43). We do not know her nationality and the text does not tell us whether her people were feuding with Offa’s.

The only evidence that she may be a peace pledge, if it can be called evidence, is that Modhyðo is gyfen goldroden like any other conventional woman. However, the treasure she brings with her to the marriage could be a dowry in a friendly alliance as well. Unlike the other marriages described in the poem, Modhyðo’s succeeds both emotionally and politically. Offa is not embroiled in a blood feud; he is

\[\text{þone selestan bi sæm tweonum, eormencynnnes. Forpam Offa wæs geofum ond gúðum, garcec man, wide geweordbod, wisdomne heold ebel sinne (1956-1960)}\]

(the best of mankind between the seas. Because Offa was, with gifts and battles, a spear-bold man, widely exalted, he held with wisdom his native land).

With this great king Modhyðo hiold heahlufan (L.1954), held the high love. They obviously have a good marriage; their successful son, who is healdum to helpe (L.1961), a help to warriors, follows Offa as king. Modhyðo’s supposed acquiescence to the status quo actually undermines it; her success as a queen (not a peace-pledge) defies the system that devalues yet necessitates the woman as peaceweaver.

Clare Lees has discussed the fragility of father-son bonds and successes in her work on the male characters of Beowulf; only in Modhyðo’s case does the “patrilineal genealogy” (Lees’ term) work without a hitch and the crown pass from father to son within a strong paternal bond. I suggest that this bond is strong because Eomer has two masculine parents, both watching out for him. Patrilineal genealogy cannot work when the mother is a peace-weaver; she will inevitably fail, as Overing has shown. Modhyðo’s masculine performance strengthens this most masculine of bonds within the poem. Her actions are not “feminist,” an inapplicable word, but assert a masculinity surprisingly like Beowulf’s. In Beowulf, the ultimate masculine act may be to leave one’s kingdom intact to one’s son—and in this as well Modhyðo has succeeded as she performs her masculine gender.

Modhyðo’s gender performance confirms that gender is not “natural” within the world of Beowulf, but dependent upon agency and power wielded over others. Modhyðo fights her own battles and her son succeeds to the throne. By discarding traditional assumptions about masculinity and femininity in the poem—the active hero, the passive peace pledge, the tamed shrew—and by investigating lexical associations of Modhyðo and Beowulf, I have shown in Beowulf a textual culture fraught with tension where gender is determined not by sex or status but by action.

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Text and Translation of Beowulf II, 1925-1962

Bold was wealce, // bregorof cyning, 1925
beah on healle, // Hygd swéde geong,
wis wellungen, // þeah ðe wihta lyt
under burhlican // gebiden hæbbe,
Hæræpes dohtor; // nes hio hnah swa þeaw,
ne to gnaed gifa // Geata leodum,
mapmegjesterna // 1930

fremu folces cwen, // Modþyða wæg,
Næmig þæt dorfe // firen' ondryse;
swaerga geséla, // deor gené þan
þæt hire an deges // nefine sinfree,
ac hime welthe // eagem stardæ;
handgæwriþne; // wecodo tellâle
æfter mundgripæ // hræpe sceþdan wæs
þæt hit sceadenmael // meæ geþingen,
wælcimealu cyðan. // scyran mose,

ideo to efnænne, // Ne bið swyfe wælcnic þeaw
þætte freðoþæwe // þeaw ðæo ænlicu cy,
æfter ligotorme // flores onsence
Hæru þæt onhtwoode[æ] // leofne mannan,
Hæþæt hio onhtwoode[æ] // Hemminges maeg
ælforfræncende // oðer sedan,
oðer hio leodbealæwa // æt gefremeðe,
invinnæba, syðdan æret wearb // 1945
gyfæn goldbroden // geðonum cempan,
æœelam dore, // syðdan hio Offæa flæ
oðer fealne flæ // be fæder lare
side gesættæ;

æþær hio syðdan well // 1950
in gumstole, // gode mære,
lifigescætha // lifigende bræc,
hæld hælhlæfan // wæl hælæþa þrego,
ealle moncyunus // mine getæge
þone selestan // bi sam tæwunn,
ærcemcyœnæ; // forðam Offa was
geofam ond gumum // garcæne man,
wæðe gewærcyð // wisdomæ heold
æwel sinnæ-; // þonon Æomor woc
hælæþum to helpe, // Hemminges maeg
nefa Garmundes, // miða ææfeæg.

(1925-1939) A) The hall was splendid, the king very valiant, high in the hall, Higd very young, wise, accomplished, though she had resided few winters under the castle enclosure. Hareth's daughter, she was not lowly thus, however, not too niggardly of gifts, of treasures, to the people of the Geats.

(1931b-1940a) Modthryth carried on, excellent queen of the folk, a terrible crime. None except a great lord of more dear, fierce companions dared to venture that so that one on a day might gaze at her with eyes, but for him a deadly bond was ordained, was considered, twisted by him; quickly thereupon a sword was appointed on account of a hand grip, so that the ornamented sword must settle it, (must) show the death-evil.

(1940b-1951a) It is not such queenly custom for a noblewoman to perform, however she may be peerless, that a peace-weaver deprive a beloved man of life after pretended injury, Indeed, the kinsman of Hemming stopped that; the ale-drinkers another (story) tell, that she performed less of harms to a people, of hostile acts, since first she was given gold-adorned to the young champion, beloved for nobilities, since by father-counsel she sought the hall of Ofa over the pale flood by a journey.

(1951b-1962) Since then she has there well enjoyed living her life on the throne, good, famous; she has held the high love with the chief of warriors, of all the race of man (as I have heard) the best of mankind between the seas. Because in gifts and in battles Offa, a spear-held man, was widely exalted, he held with wisdom his native land; from him Eomer was born as a help to warriors. Hemming's kinsman, nephew of Garmund, powerful against evils.
Notes


3. See, for example, David Allen, “The Coercive Ideal in Beowulf” in Literary and Historical Perspectives of the Middle Ages, eds. Patricia Cummmins et al. (Morgantown: West Virginia UP, 1982), 120-32.


5. Chickerling (op.cit.) discusses these stylistics in depth.


7. See Chickerling for summaries of the onomastic and historical arguments about Modrydho.

8. For instance, Mary Kay Temple analyzes Modrydho as one of a group of ives or noblemen in Old English poetry in “Beowulf 1258-1266: Grendel’s Lady-Mother,” English Language Notes 23 (1986): 10-15; Jane Chance analyzes her within the rubric of an Eve/Mary opposition so that Modrydho starts out like Eve and ends up like Mary in Woman as Hero in Old English Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986). Helen Damico reads her as a valkyrie-type who can be both terrible and welcoming in Beowulf’s

References


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