Behind the Boar-Helm: Examining Men and Performed Masculinity in Pre-Conquest England

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Abstract

Through close readings, classical social theory, and Butlerian gender theory, this work examines the now-accepted image of hegemonic medieval masculinity. The poetic canon, through works like *Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon, The Seafarer, The Wanderer,* and *Maxims,* reveals an archive fixated on the heroic, stalwart man whose word and deed hold weight amongst his peers. *Cynewulf and Cyneheard* investigates a similar proposition in prose, grounding a man's honor in his oath during times of political turmoil. *Judith* bars off masculine traits from access by women, thus introducing the explicit notion of gender roles. These interventions seemingly uphold a static image of pre-Conquest England, elevating men to their patriarchal status and enforcing misogynistic readings of these texts. This status quo, however, leaves us with the question of what to do with the moments of non-conformity. Whose masculinity is admirable? Whose attempts receive scribal and poetic critique? What does this mean for the form of pre-Conquest society?

I argue that the Old English canon continually shatters the expectation of a static and unchanging masculinity by creating these works as representations of the ideal rather than the realistic man. Masculinity's performance develops through constant negotiation and management of expectations; social pressures ebb and flow to influence the desired expression of traits in a multiple-theater war: self-perception, homosocial connections, heterosocial connections, political and legal duties, and religious expression. All these areas reveal the subtle shaping of expectations that form our modern perspective of medieval society.

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Introduction

What makes a man? From a modern, American perspective, we might wonder: is it his strong, assertive personality or his easily identifiable modes of dress, marked with symbols of warfare and manual labor? Or perhaps we can parse it from his mannerisms, his lack of tears in the face of tragedy or the web of distant male friendships?[1] In the pre-Conquest conception of gender, man and woman become societal markers of behavior and role; however, man's performance deserves deeper analysis rather than the surface-level acknowledgement of patriarchal and misogynistic roots that still exist within our own relationships.[2] Literature, for our purposes, functions as motivation to establish social norms and provide reasoning for actions taken. The men presented in these works provide examples of ideal masculinity, flawed masculinity, and navigate both internal and external pressures to perform his role well to provide lessons for their audiences.

The resulting works – *The Wanderer, Maxims, Beowulf, Judith, The Seafarer, The Battle of Maldon, Cynewulf and Cyneheard* – provide careful scholars the opportunity to reconstruct the faceless warrior using his own anxieties, his own expectations in his own language. In the field of Medieval literature, there is a deficit in our theoretical interests. Feminist theory, happily engaging with other time periods throughout the 70s, is noticeably absent from our journals and archives. By bridging the gaps between modern scholastic theory and the pre-Conquest period's perspective of itself, I argue that we can glean a full picture of the complex web of social

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[1] Hill, pp. 249. Hill identifies correctly that the pre-Conquest man is seemingly free of this forced emotionlessness, being free to weep openly and express love for his friends.

[2] Previously labeled Anglo-Saxon, the term is substituted throughout this work to better facilitate a composite image of masculinity. Aside from the term's pejoration over time, we have proof of other ethnic groups contributing to the group culture of England (I.e. a Danish-British audience in *Beowulf,* Celtic groups).

relationships and surveillance that produces the now-archetypal warrior-hero that dominated the pre-Conquest imagination.

The Man Removed

A lone man sits in his wooden boat, frost-kissed and tossed by the waves. His heart aches from the sorrow of separation. The world around him lies silent, empty of company, except for his own thoughts. Thus is the way of fate.

> Oft him anhaga are gebideð,
> Metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcearig
> geond lagulade longe sceolde
> mid hondum hrimcealde sæ,
> wadan wræclastas. Wyrd bið ful aræd.[3]
> [Often the solitary one, himself, awaits honor, God's mercy, although he is sorrowful at heart for he must cross the sea-way for a long time, traveling paths of exile across the frost-cold sea. Fate is resolute.]

These five opening lines of *The Wanderer* toss the reader into a frosty boat, bidding them to sit beside a mourning, solitary man. The text offers subtle clues about where we find ourselves socially— "wræclasta" translates to "exile-track"—and thus implies wrong-doing and punishment into the man's separation from society.[4] This is not a new development, as indicated by the phrase "longe sceolde;" this is not a fresh wound, and our speaker wishes to reflect on his situation. He has since left behind the comforts of human solidarity and interaction. The phrase also emphasizes the man's lack of choice in his exile, using a conjugation of the verb "sculan" which "[denotes] obligation or constraint of various kinds," similar to the way that our word "must" functions; he *must* depart along these exile-routes (regardless of personal desire) due to a

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[3] *The Wanderer,* lines 1-5. The following invocations of the text will be referred to by parenthetical line numbers.
[4] "Wræc-lást." *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*. This kenning notably presents exile as a structured form, with the term path implying a clear direction away from the previous homeland.

social contract.[5] This compulsion to leave, to wander the earth alone, leaves him "modcearig" or "anxious at heart" and unsettled by his solitude; the poetic construction reveals the anxious psychology of the banished man, unable to rejoin the world he left behind.[6]

The Wanderer is not the only work in the Old English corpus focused on the exile of its speaker; it participates in a much larger tradition of elegiac poetry, defined as either "a song or poem of lamentation, [especially] for the dead" or "a piece [of writing] imbued with a sense of mourning or melancholy affection for something."[7] These sentiments of loss and lamentation echo throughout the canon (especially in *The Wanderer, The Wife's Lament* and *The Seafarer*) and, in 1877, become the basis for Bernhard ten Brink's claim that "Old English lyrical feeling knows in reality but one art-form, that of the elegy" (Ten Brink, pg. 67). Since the classical definition of elegy aligns with *The Wanderer,* what does our speaker mourn?

Reading the poem as a secular piece, we can conclude that the man mourns his rupture with hall-society. The pinnacle of happiness for the speaker only exists within the "meoduhalle" [mead-hall] where he, among friends, can "wenian mid wynnum" [entertain with joys] (lines 27a & 29a). This sudden lack of his accustomed life, such as the lack of "wiste" [feast] while isolated, indicates that the pinnacle of comfort to the secular man is in the hall. He is removed from beer drinking, from poetry reciting, from treasure earning; the long separation mentioned in the first five lines indicates that he looks most fondly back at the time when he experienced these nicer prospects. These reflections are rife with references to "his winedryhtres / leofes larcwidum longe forþolian" [his lord's wisdom done without for a long time], implying that only his secular

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[5] "Sculan." *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online.*
[6] "Mód-cearig." *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online.*
[7] "Elegy, n.". *Oxford English Dictionary*. Definitions 1a and 1c are the most relevant for our purposes.

lord can ease the sorrow plaguing his heart (lines 37b-38). In fact, the author invokes a dreamlike

scene in which the speaker imagines himself submitting to his lord once more.

> þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
> clyppe ond cysse ond on cneo lecge
> honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ǣr
> in geardagum giefstolas breac (lines 41-44).

> [It seems to him in mind that he embraces and kisses his lord of men, and on knee lays hands and head before his lord, as he did sometimes before, in days of yore, enjoyed the gift-seat.]

The language of the court, invoking the throne and his physical gestures of piety, reveals

the dependency of the speaker on the social systems and connections to survive. Without this

stage available to him, the solitary man suffers his dark thoughts of death and fatalism. Of

course, this language also doubles as an invocation of religious sentiments but terms like

"giefstol" and "mondryhten" also exist as poetic conventions outside of strictly religious

settings.[8]

He even clues us into the root cause of his exile, invoking the features of the genre: "(1) a

sense of direction away from the 'homeland' or 'beloved;' (2) departure (initiative movement);

(3) turning (initiative-continuative movement); (4) endurance of hardships (continuative

movement in exile); (5) seeking" (Greenfield 203). The consistent references to the lack of

earthly pleasures, directing his life away from his adored hall, implies a violation of the social

contract; this man may very well have been a coward, fleeing the battlefield and thus living

without his dead lord and comrades – "feor oft gemon / wælsleahta worn" [he often remembers,

long ago, a multitude of slaughters] (lines 90b-91a). His constant remembrance of losing his

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[8] Notably, one would do well to recall the usage of "gifstol" in *Beowulf* to denote a secular king's role as the gift-giver in hall society.

companions is certainly consistent with the direction away from home; his journey further and further from home aligns with the departing movement.

Throughout *The Wanderer,* it becomes apparent that the poet seeks to express a "painful longing for vanished happiness" through the guise of "reflective and descriptive language" required from a traditionally defined elegy—all mediated by the panging loss of society (Mora, pp. 132). Phrases like "wineleas guma" [friendless man] enable the speaker of *The Wanderer* to engage in the staples of the genre *and* express his experience with social "suicide," in a Durkheimian sense (line 45). Emile Durkheim published *Suicide* in 1897 as a sociological analysis of Europe and its rise in suicide cases from an external, social perspective, rather than a psychological one.[9]Through his study, Durkheim describes the fragmentation of ties between the individual and society, termed *anomie* or "a state of alienation from mainstream society characterized by feelings of hopelessness, loss of purpose, and isolation."[10] This fragmentation results in the following constructions to describe the urge to commit suicide: "Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of *religious society*. Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of *domestic society*. Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of *political society*" (Durkheim, 208).[11] *The Wanderer* demonstrates the loss of integration for all three of those relationships.

The speaker lacks the connection to his fellow man; in his exile, he exists on the outside of the social relationship— "gemon he selesecgas ond sincþege, / hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine / wenede to wiste" —and thus can only interact with others in memory [he remembers (the) retainers and receiving treasure. (He remembers) how, in his youth, his generous lord

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[9] See Jones, *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*.
[10] "Anomie, n.". *Oxford English Dictionary.*
[11] Emphasis mine.

accustomed (him) to feasting] (lines 34-36a). His personal ties to the domestic community wane;

through the Durkheimian approach, the lack of strong unity between the individual and his

'group' contradicts "[forbidding members] to dispose willfully of themselves" (Durkheim, 209).

Thus, the speaker lies stricken by anomie; under social theory, he lies in the perfect position to

commit suicide, thrust into the position where "wyn eal gedreas" [joy all disappearing] (line

36b). Yet, despite the anomic suicide looming in the background, pacing around the edges of the

poem, the wandering speaker presses on. He must complete the lamentation of his world and

conclude his elegy before death allows him to pass on.

> Sume wig fornom,
> ferede in forðwege: sumne fugel oþbær
> ofer heanne holm, sumne se hara wulf
> deaðe gedælde, sumne dreorighleor
> in eorðscræfe eorl gehydde (lines 80b-84).
> [Some war took away, carried forward into death: a bird bore away one over [the] sea, the
grey wolf shared death with one, one sad-faced noble hid in [an] earthen cave.]

These invocations of death demonstrate the speaker's understanding of how solitude and

death follow one another. The poet takes on a fatalistic psychology, presenting fate's resolve to

inevitably lead all men into death. Men will march along, "without relief or rest, towards an

indefinite goal," much like how the speaker's exile seemingly haunts his path until his death at

the hands of beasts or some other natural deterioration (Durkheim, 257). Thus, he mourns his

separation through his anomic heart.

Traditional lamentation is not the only form of elegy that *The Wanderer* fits into. For

instance, the stress on 'vanished happiness' and a 'paradise lost' influences the definition of the

genre along "the Romantic concept of elegy," which demands "a sentimental core," "a

meditative tone," and "a markedly personal character" while ignoring what Maria Jose Mora

calls the "moralizing purpose" of Old English works (Mora 132-133). We must address this

ignored "moral purpose," but for now, let us examine *The Wanderer* against the Romantic definition.

For an Old English poem, *The Wanderer*'s poet carefully attends to the matter of interiority and perspective; the poem concocts an intimate moment between reader and speaker, crying out for some sort of connection in the absence of his hall-mates:

> Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan,
> Ne se hreo hyge hilpe gefremman,
> For ðon domgeorne dreorigne oft
> In hyre breostcofan bindað fæste;
> Swa ic modesfan minne sceolde,
> Oft earmcearig, eðle bidæled,
> Freomægum feor, feterum sælan (lines 15-21).
> [The weary heart cannot withstand fate, nor can the troubled heart provide help; therefore, those eager for glory must bind firmly their sorrows in their chest; So, must I [bind], often wretchedly, my mind, separated [from my] homeland, [with] kinsmen far, fasten fetters.]

The speaker laments his inability to fight "wyrde" or fate, leaving him far from home and without friends. He mourns the lack of kinsmen, of his homeland while simultaneously asserting how the situation was far from his control— "ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan" (line 15). He is utterly severed from all previous ties and floats about the world as an outcast. To some, namely the individualist, this freedom enables the speaker to prioritize himself above all else; to others, the more socially minded, exile represents the "fetters fastened" on his role and his inability to re-enter the collaborative system.

We get confirmation of this more community-oriented desire in the speaker's psyche through his frantic search, "sele-dreorig," for "sinces bryttan" [hall-sorrowful and missing his lord and treasure-giver] (line 25). The true penalty of exile is the separation from community, from the protection and generosity of his lord—the most important relationship in the speaker's world is the homosocial hall, where men gather to trade food, drink, stories, and treasure.

Without this connection, the wanderer has no purpose in his life, no reason to motivate himself. Here lies the anomic approach to exile, under Durkheim. To participate in society, our wanderer must accept "a conscience superior to his own," becoming subject to society above his own impulses; however, in this yoke, he subjects himself to the loss, where "by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, [society] is momentarily incapable of exercising this influence" and rendering the man rudderless (Durkheim 252).

Let us now approach the "moralizing purpose" allegedly left behind in the Romantic definition. Mora views the Romantic elegiac genre as inherently diminishing a larger aspect of Old English poetry, specifically reducing the "religious-didactic" nature of *The Wanderer* and others like it into pieces where "the melancholy feeling pervading the [poem] is seen as a central trait of the national self" (Mora 135-6). It becomes easy to see this gap, especially given the final lines of the poem: "wel bið þam þe him are seceð, / frofre to Fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð" [well is the man who seeks prosperity for himself, consolation (aid) from the Father in heaven, where the stability for all of us exists] (lines 114b-115). Despite the melancholic body of the poem, the speaker ends with consolation; through God, there is the potential to be well in the absence of earthly pleasures. Even through his exile, the wandering soul may still receive stability and community from Heaven. This is also not the only mention of religious sentiments within the poem; the work opens with an invocation of "Metudes miltse," begging God's compassion during the speaker's painful exile (line 2a). Pain in the earthly realm begets prosperity in the next realm, but in the meantime, it is best to invoke God's mercy. As a result of remembering God, the speaker cannot commit suicide—he risks his mortal soul in the process as "he who kills himself still kills nothing else than man" and therefore goes to Hell,

according to St. Augustine (1.20). Merely remembering his religious ties, however, is not enough to explain his fatalistic approach to life, without seeking to end the miserable experience.

The religious "lack" identified by critics of the Romantic approach to elegy strongly aligns with Durkheim's egoistic approach to suicide with one key difference. In Durkheimian terms, the ego erupts from the individual's "own personality tending to surmount the collective personality. The more weakened the groups to which he belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself" (Durkheim 209). This social web is the essence of the Romantic interpretation of the poem; reading *The Wanderer* without Mora's identified moral center neglects the importance of community. While he may fix his sights on the heavenly reward for surviving, the ultimate source of his stoic acceptance lies in the "eorle indryhten þeaw / þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde" [noble warrior custom that he binds firmly his life-enclosure (heart)] (lines 12b-13). The true rupture that ought to fuel his suicide is his separation from the mead-hall, yet our man remembers the warrior virtue of remaining upright and focused on a goal. Despite his exile, the wandering man remains steadfast—through his example, we arrive at the now-gendered, masculine virtue of a stalwart countenance.

The Man Amongst Men

Being a man or performing manhood, though, is not rooted in how a man reacts to solitude, nor are his personal values, moral or otherwise, developed in a vacuum. His understanding and execution of gender, like his masculinely gendered persistence in exile, must develop from somewhere—traditionally, within the homosocial society in which he lives. Gender surveillance is not a new sociological concept; it is traditionally applied to police the roles of women (and therefore functions as an aspect of patriarchy). When used in this context, I aim to

demonstrate how the policing of gender, in reference to men, constructs a society in which every act must cater to other men; in other words, there is no escape from the gender expectations because of the mono-sexed interacts present within literature, especially when writers demonstrate the ideal man. Close examination of the literature will demonstrate that masculinity was (and continues to be) centered around mutual surveillance of the men around you, both within the hall and on the battlefield.

How do we understand battle and its effect on the homosocial reality of men? Through *The Battle of Maldon,* the relationships between the speaker, Lord Byrhtnoth and the infantry polices the behavior of men in their role as a warrior and defender. The value of a man in his society stems from his valiant dedication to the group's success; his stalwart dedication enables him to fight and die alongside his lord. The speaker, rather than fixating on the visceral nature of battle, drives our attention to the mental and emotional state of each warrior:

> Eac him wolde Eadric his ealdre gelæstan
> frean to gefeohte; ongan þa forð beran
> gar to guþe. He hæfde god geþanc
> þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
> ord and brad swurd; beot he gelæste
> þa he ætforan his frean feohtan sceolde.
> [And Eadric also wished to serve his lord at battle; he began to carry forth his spear to battle. He had good purpose as long as he could hold in hand shield and broad sword; he performed his vow when he should fight before his lord.][12]

We must fixate on the role of the lord in this section, teasing out whether it refers to God or Eadric's earthly lord. Given the context – the lines focusing on Eadric's thoughts come directly after Byrthnoð's orders to "forð gangan" [go forth, meaning to physically progress but also to pass on into death] – the poet seems to be positioning Eadric to submit more immediately

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[12] *The Battle of Maldon,* lines 11-16. Lines will be from this work until otherwise noted.

to his liege on Earth with the potential room for obeying God in the afterlife (line 3). Supporting

this conclusion is the history of Medieval analogues; whether in "Classical Greek and Latin,

Medieval and Anglo-Latin, Old English, Old Saxon, Old Welsh, Old Irish, Old French and Old

Norse," male relationships between men and their superiors fixates on the battle relationship

(Clark 476).[13]

As a result, Eadric's desire to help his lord explores the secular, masculine ideal in

warfare, with a young man invoking the vow he made to his lord to motivate himself, that had

largely fallen away in the reality of conflict (Baker 228). Notably, Peter Baker's introduction to

the poem references the "decades following in 991" where "English treachery" brought down the

utopian ideals of strict codes of loyalty to one's lord and cause (Baker 228). The poet's

invocation of Eadric's "good purpose" valorizes the honoring of his connection to his liege-lord;

his devotion to the homosocial, yet hierarchical system becomes the ideal metric against which

the poet measures his male characters (and thus surveils and issues "checks" to balance his

characters' thoughts and actions).

Eadric is also hardly the only instance of this external praise for stalwart and loyal men.

Byrhtnoth sends Wulfstan to hold the bridge and, like the dedicated Eadric, Ælfere and Maccus

follow their lord to his post.

> Þær stodon mid Wulfstane wigan unforhte,
> Ælfere and Maccus, modige twegen,
> þa noldon æt þam forda fleam gewyrcan,
> ac hi fæstlice wið ða fynd weredon
> þa hwile þe hi wæpna wealdan moston (lines 79-83).

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[13] Clark's note includes a collection of analogues, organized by language. Most of them are in Old Norse, as he identifies, and therefore are perhaps the most useful in terms of linguistic similarities, proximity, etc.

[Unafraid warriors stood there with Wulfstan, Ælfere and Maccus, brave two, who did not wish to make flight at the ford, but they resolutely defended against the enemies for as long as they could wield weapons.]

These two men exhibit the same dedication to their lord but this time with an emphasis on their desire to avoid desertion. For Eadric, leaving the battlefield was never an option; Ælfere and Maccus recognize that warfare can cause men to neglect their oaths and decide to remain (and die) anyway. The poet's emphasis is on their stalwart devotion, jabbing at the "weak" man who refuses to honor his oath and upsets the social order. Note the praise of their deaths – the poet calls them "resolute" and "brave" to emphasize the higher calling demonstrated within their oath to their liege. This honor-centric view idolizes men willing to cast aside self-preservation in favor of their vows of brotherhood.

Our speaker continually places Eadric, Ælfere, and Maccus in opposition to other men, emphasizing their shared positive qualities in contrast with the disappointing men:

> Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þær beon noldon.
> Þær wearð Oddan bearn ærest on fleame
> Godric fram guþe and þone godan forlet
> þe him mænigne oft mearh gesealde.
> He gehleop þone eoh þe ahte his hlaford
> on þam gerædum þe hit riht ne wæs,
> and his broðru mid him begen ærndon,
> Godwine and Godwig guþe ne gymdon,
> ac wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton,
> flugon on þæt fæsten and hyra feore burgon,
> and manna ma þonne hit ænig mæð wære
> gyf hi þa geearnunga ealle gemundon
> þe he him to duguþe gedon hæfde (lines 185-197).
> [Then they turned from battle, those who wished to not be there. There was Oddan's child, first in flight, Godric, from war, abandoned the good (lord) that often gave him horses. He mounted the horse that his lord owned, on the saddle that was not right to ride. And his brothers both ran with him, Godwine and Godwig cared not for war but turned from battle and sought the woods, fled into that stronghold, and saved their lives and more men than would have been fitting, if they remembered all the rewards that he had done to benefit them.]

The poet emphasizes the wrongness surrounding desertion as the battle deteriorates and the foot soldiers lose their resolve. He constructs the fate of the "spineless" men as being "þe hit riht ne wæs" or fundamentally wrong; Godric not only breaks his vow and flees but also robs his lord to accomplish this task (line 190). Our speaker fixes our attention on the previous relationship of exchange between men – "þe him mænigne oft mearh gesealde" – and disparages the lack of follow-through after Godric has received his horses, his gifts, his payment for service (line 188). He directly violates the relationship between lord and follower in favor of his own self-interest. Godwine and Godwig, in joining their brother's flight, also forget the rewards of serving a lord in their mad scramble to escape their fates. Why would they risk social status and their reputations (notice how their father, Oddan, is the first reference to the brothers)? The speaker and poet join their voices as one in disgust: these men were cowards and fled because they did not wish to fight – "guþe ne gymdon" (line 192). Surveillance, therefore, becomes necessary to prevent the deterioration of the male culture of exchange; disparaging these fleeing soldiers dishonors their memory and provides the audience of the poem with an example through the threat of infamy. Reputation becomes a pawn in the game of surveillance, forcing men to exhibit loyalty to their last breath or to risk the reputation of their families.

At the more extreme end, *Cynewulf and Cyneheard* explores the practicality of not merely fleeing the social bond (and battlefield) but violently severing the bonds between men through prose chronicle. The chronicle functions as a historical record for the English people; through its timeline, we learn that Cynewulf deposed the previous king in 757 and the old king's brother, Cyneheard, seeks to avenge the loss. Cynewulf and his opponent come to blows in a small town; Cynewulf dies during their skirmish and his men arrive to avenge their lord in retaliation. Preceding the deserters at Maldon, Cyneheard seeks to win over the warriors:

Ða on morgenne gehierdun þæt þæs cyninges þegnas þe him beæftan wærun þæt se cyning ofslægen wæs. Þa ridon hie þider ond his aldormon Osric ond Wiferþ his þegn ond þa men þe he beæftan him læfde ær, ond þone æþeling on þære byrig metton þær se cyning ofslægen læg (ond þa gatu him to belocen hæfdon), ond þa þærto eodon. Ond þa gebead he him hiera agenne dom feos ond londes gif hie him þæs rices uþon, ond him cyþdon þæt hiera mægas him mid wæron þa þe him from noldon. Ond þa cuædon hie þæt him nænig mæg leofra nære þonne hiera hlaford, ond hie næfre his banan folgian noldon (*Cynewulf*, lines 9-11).

[When the king's thanes behind him heard in the morning that the king was killed, they rode to the spot, Osric his alderman and Wiverth his thane and the men that he had left behind; and they met the prince in town, where the king lay dead. The gates, however, were locked against them, which they attempted to force; but he promised them their own choice of money and land, if they would grant him the kingdom; reminding them that their relatives were already with him, who would never desert him. To that they answered that no relative could be dearer to them than their lord, and that they would never follow his murderer.][14]

Cyneheard fails to bribe his defeated foes' thegns away from their bonds of loyalty. These men would rather die than become oath-breakers and deserters. Their reputation as men of Cynewulf provides these men more than the tempting promise of riches and status in Cyneheard's court, more than the promised protection of their kinsmen in the coming battles ("nænig mæg leofra nære þonne hiera hlaford.") From the scribe's invocation of their archetypal loyalty, we learn that men experience surveillance to prevent wrong intentions for taking oaths. Cynewulf's men refuse to pledge oaths under the thinly veiled threats of violence against their families and the tempting offer of unearned riches for oath breaking. The men even declare that kinship bonds mean nothing in the face of breaking their vow to protect the king; under the paradigm of thegnship and oaths made to other men, these warriors become heroes despite neglecting their own benefit down the line. Surveillance also reveals the high stakes of homosocial interactions; Cynewulf's men end their lives violently to avoid violating the bonds that comprise their social structure. Constancy in the form of oath keeping, therefore, becomes the ideal masculine virtue and a marker of national virtue.

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[14] Translation assisted by Michael Swanton.

Recall how the gender surveillance in *The Battle of Maldon* anticipates the scribal concern for a warrior ethic since lost. Specifically, we must recall Baker's note about how *The Battle of Maldon* scribe seems to present his work in the wake of an inversion of traditional values. The valorization and continuous monitoring of the warrior virtues, oath-keeping, implies that English warriors display a different trait from those around them. The surveillance and performance of manhood becomes a social marker of one's membership to the emerging national group; I argue that the literary fixation on proper conduct with other men is meant to elevate (or merely separate) English troops from their enemies.[15]

This gender surveillance does not merely end with the discussion of warfare and elevating Englishmen above their enemies. Even in times of peace, men must perform their masculinity to gain approval from other men. For instance, the organized Beowulf arrives in Denmark to defeat the monster Grendel, but first must engage with the Danish hospitality. During this scene, we receive an 'insider scoop' to hall-relations between young men. Beowulf first asserts his desire to help the Danes, centered around regaling the hall with his lineage and vow to end the crisis in Heorot; he *performs* the warrior role to establish a connection with the other men around him through speech acts:

> Ic eom Higelaces
> mæg ond magoðegn; hæbbe ic mærða fela
> ongunnen on geogoþe. Me wearð Grendles þing
> on minre eþeltyrf undyrne cuð;
> secgað sæliðend þæt þæs sele stande,
> reced selesta inca gehwylcum
> under heofenes haðor beholen weorþeð (*Beowulf,* lines 407b-414).

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[15] I am not asserting, however, that these traits are somehow unique to England alone. The poetic analogues in Iceland and what is now Germany suggest that oath-keeping, valor, and constancy were near universally valuable. Hill's article, on page 246, invokes the Old Norse King Harold to demonstrate the value of a man's word and the hero, Halldor Snorrason, to demonstrate constancy in life.

[I am Hygelac's kinsman and hall-troop; in my youth, I have had many successes. News of Grendel's tricks came to me, on my home-turf, unveiled; seafarers said that this hall, this home of warriors, lies empty and useless after the evening light under heaven's serene sky goes hidden.]

Beowulf's qualifications stem from his war-acts in youth and his connection to another high-ranking man; invoking Hygelac here, while offering his services to the Danes, serves to bolster his unknown masculinity in the known performance and embodiment of another king. Like the castigation of Oddan's children in *Maldon,* the reputation in a man's community depends on his actions and the actions of those above him hierarchically. Hygelac becomes the hinge to anchor Beowulf's self-presentation, hoping that his reputation will influence the public performance of his underlings. Masculinity becomes a state of being heavily influenced by perception of others in a chain-reaction; a man's poor behavior shames his family, friends, and lord, but his honorable behavior allows him the privilege of feeding into and benefiting from the mutual trust network. This system reveals the reason behind the *Battle of Maldon* poet's ire with Oddan for the actions of his sons. The kinship network must bear the burden of one man's mistakes, tainting the entire lineage (in this case, the punishment is tripled by the cowardice of each deserting brother).

However, because Beowulf must plead his case outside of that kinship network, the poet also provides us with an example of his own record – "hæbbe ic mærða fela / ongunnen on geogoþe." His speech act emphasizes his experience and his success at once, seemingly preventing the Danes from questioning his warrior role and performance. However, this is not enough to establish a reputation in this new hall. In another act of policing, we see a young Dane, Unferth, challenging Beowulf's skill at war and prompting a round of verbal sparring (or flyting); he seeks to undermine Beowulf's authority as a newcomer in Heorot by engaging in a

calculated instance of surveilling and checking his opponent's masculine, warrior virtues. He

announces to the hall:

> Eart þu se Beowulf, se þe wið Brecan wunne
> on sidne sæ, ymb sund flite,
> ðæ git for wlence wada cunnedon
> ond for dolgilpe on deop wæter
> aldrum neþdon (lines 506-510a)?
> [Are you that Beowulf, who with Breca competed in swimming, across the broad sea, where you two, for pride, to prove (yourselves) went off, explored the deep water for vainglory, (the) daring of youth?]

Unferth's vocabulary focuses on the risks surrounding the young hero, how he

emphasizes the flighty nature of a young man who is only focused on his own desires and

proving himself. Words like "dolgilpe" [foolish pride] result in this announcement reflecting

poorly on Beowulf's self-control, condemning him for funneling his warrior skills into trivial

tasks like swimming contests with his own kinsmen. Challenging Brecca to the swimming

contest endangers them both and potentially deprives the lord of his followers and the families of

their sons—both of whom are necessary to support the homosocial hierarchy present within pre-

Conquest English literature. Unferth's gender policing forces Beowulf into a position of

justifying his past mistakes in front of an audience; the emphasis on the youthful and prideful

dangers surrounding the contest represents a disordered version of battlefield bravery, creating a

situation where the danger is fabricated as a method of stroking one's ego rather than

contributing to the safety and riches of the group.

The homosocial relationship, therefore, becomes a balancing act between confidence in

one's abilities and excessive pride ("ofermode" as described in *The Battle of Maldon*). Despite

the example of Eadric and company in the battle, the speaker presents their oath keeping as an

unnecessary risk; their lord, Byrhtnoth, makes the fatal mistake: "Ða se eorl ongan for his

ofermode / alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode" [Then the earl began, in his overconfidence, to

allow the hateful people to land] (*The Battle of Maldon*, lines 89-90). The poet's invocation of

the disordered masculine virtue clouds the circumstances of loss; the warriors laying down their

lives at his side do embody the responsible Englishman's role but at what cost? Through this

positioning, we can spy echoes of Unferth's chastisement of reckless youth. Byrhtnoth, despite

being a wiser, older, and higher ranked man, still must perform his role without placing the risk

onto others; the loss of control over the sole site of crossing leads his men to slaughter in a

perverse violation of the trust placed in the homosocial hierarchy. Pride, mediated through the

men around you, becomes a social performance. The correct version, through flyting and

boasting, easily slips into overconfidence without results. There is a certain balance required for

the proper performance of masculinity.

Yet Byrhtnoth is not entirely without redemption, indicating that there is some room for

negotiation of flaws within the literary enforcement of the ideal man. Despite his mistake,

Byrhtnoth still goes down resolutely and with honor:

> Þa Byrhtnoð bræd bill of sceðe
> brad and bruneccg and on þa byrnan sloh.
> To raþe hine gelette lidmanna sum
> þa he þæs eorles earm amyrde.
> Feoll þa to foldan fealohilte swurd;
> ne mihte he gehealdan heardne mece,
> wæpnes wealdan (lines 162-168a).
> [Then Byrhtnoth drew his sword from its sheath, broad and shiny-edged, and struck out at
> the corslet. Too quickly a certain one of the seamen hindered him when he injured the warrior's
> arm. The yellow-hilted sword fell to the earth; no longer was he able to hold the stern sword nor
> weapon wield.]

Byrhtnoth's death mirrors the deaths of Eadric and all the other men who die fighting in

the battle; they "go forth" into the next life knowing that their oaths were upheld and that their

swords were of use to the budding national project. In short, even men who lapse in their

performances of proper masculinity receive poetic acknowledgement of their accomplishments; the men around them still recognize the act of performance and offer forgiveness when traits fail to represent the literary pinnacle of perfect gender.

The Man Against Woman

Fragments of masculinity in Old English can also appear in opposition to the feminine; as Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble,* "the 'subject' within the existential analytic of subjects of sex/gender/desire misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine 'Other' outside the universalizing norms of personhood, hopelessly 'particular,' embodied, condemned to immanence" (Butler, 15-16). If, operating under the inherently misogynistic society, we treat the masculine traits as the expectation, we can reconstruct the orthodox values through moments of women subverting the expectations and regaining their power. This is how we arrive at *Judith,* at *Beowulf,* searching for the reversal of roles to pinpoint what privileges were socially constructed as only for men.

The surviving fragment of *Judith* opens with the status quo, with men forcing women into a position of being acted upon and exercising full control over their bodies.

> Hie ða on reste gebrohton
> snude ða snoteran idese; eodon ða stercedferhðe,
> hæleð heora hearran cyðan þæt wæs seo halige meowle
> gebroht on his burgetelde. Þa wearð se brema on mode
> bliðe burga ealdor, þohte ða beorhtan idese
> mid widle ond mid womme besmitan (lines 54b-59a).

> [Then they brought the wise woman quickly in the bed; went the courageous, the warriors [who] made known to their lord that the holy woman was brought to his bed-tent. Then was the lord of towns, famous in heart, happy at heart; [he] intended to defile the bright woman with filth and sin.]

Thus are the intentions of Holofernes, exercising his masculine agency by violating

Judith, removing her agency in favor of bolstering his. He moves her around the camp, confines

her movement within the bed-tent, and even demonstrates a stereotypically patriarchal

possession over Judith. In these lines, Judith does not operate as a person but rather as a trophy,

whose own thoughts only exist in the space between Holofernes' articulated intentions. To be a

man, in contrast to a woman, is to be the possessor or the main actor rather than the passively

possessed prop; this dynamic exists in the same space as the dynamic between the king and his

thane, as we have previously discussed.

The objectification of women is not a bug of pre-conquest society, but rather a feature.

Many Old English texts deal with gender by defining men as being the generous haves and

woman as the expensive have-nots; see, for instance, this selection from *Maxims I* in the Exeter

Book: "cyning sceal mid ceape cwene gebicgan, / bunum ond beagum; bu sceolon ǣrest

/ geofum god wesan" [(a) king shall buy his queen with her price, with cups and rings; both must

be good of gifting first] *(Maxim I,* lines 81-83a). In this heterosocial dynamic, the man purchases

and owns his bride; there is no consideration of her wishes other than demanding that she, once

joined to her husband, will assist in bolstering his performance of generous masculinity.

Holofernes exhibits the masculine virtue of generosity to a dangerous extent; in his pre-battle

joy, he offers gross excess and violates the temperance of gift giving in his offers ("swā se

inwidda ofer ealne dæġ / dryhtguman sīne drenċte mid wine / swīðmōd sinces brytta" [so the

wicked one made, over the day, made his warriors drunk with wine, arrogant giver of treasure]

(*Judith*, lines 28-30a). Considering his boundary violations with gifting to his men, inhibiting

their masculine role as warriors with drunkenness, it becomes dreadfully apparent that his

intentions towards Judith also violate the purchase bond between man and wife. To clarify, "her

passivity as an object exchanged is assumed," using her as another method of consuming excess, and that is how we end up with Judith in the drunken Holofernes' bedroom (Mullally 256).

Judith, like its codex neighbor *Beowulf,* heavily genders commodity exchange; men have specific roles (giving gifts) as women do (being received by a man), in which "the exchange of goods signifies status" (thus implying that the ownership of women elevates a man's status in society) (Mullally 257). We can immediately spot this objectification in the descriptions of women: "hringum ġehrodene," "beorhtan idese," "golde gefraetewod," and "beagum gehlæste" [with rings adorned, bright lady, gold-adorned, and with bracelets adorned].[16] The emphasized aspects of Judith are traits that link her back to bright, shiny objects. This material obsession links back to the pre-Conquest love of "precious metals, which better reflected the Anglo-Saxon 'love of resplendence' […] The material worth of these objects is often emphasized in the poetry" (Overing 43). Judith thus becomes an extension of man's material culture; her worth is tied into her brightness, her splendor in wearing the best artifacts of her society—items whose ownership would have been mediated by a man's gift.

Beowulf's discussion of gender commodity centers, in contrast to the violent ownership of Judith, on the 'peace-weaver' trope. The trope plays upon the material fetishization of women; much like Judith and her bright description, Hrothgar's queen is an object— "a gift transferred from one treasure-giver to another" to cement political ties between two groups (Olesiejko 105). Butler describes the a similar process of becoming, centered around the performance of a role much like Wealhtheow's: "the body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally

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[16] *Judith,* Lines 37a, 58b, 171b, 36b.

dramatic" (521).[17] Wealhtheow is equally as bejeweled as Judith and both are idolized as objects,

but Wealhtheow utilizes that dramatic image to "constitute the symbol of male power that

objectifies and enslaves her" while simultaneously acting within her role to subtly shift her

husband's power to her advantage (Olesiejko 105).

Wealhtheow, in Heorot, occupies the role of host alongside her husband; she carries the

ceremonial cup and presents it to the guests as the first offer of hospitality.

> Eode Wealhþeo forð,
> cwen Hroðgares cynna gemyndig,
> grette goldhroden guman on healle,
> ond þa freolic wif ful gesealde
> ærest East-Dena eþelwaerde,
> bæd hine bliðne æt þære beorþege,
> leodum leofne; he on lust geþeah
> symbel ond seleful, sigerof kyning.
> Ymbeode þa ides Helminga
> duguþe ond geogoþe dæl æghwylcne,
> sincfato sealde, oþ þæt sæl alamp
> þæt hio Beowulfe, beaghroden cwen
> mode geþungen medoful […] (*Beowulf,* lines 12b-624b)
> [Then Wealhtheow moved forth, Hrothgar's queen, mindful of manners, greeted, gold-
> adorned, the men in the hall, and the noble woman poured full cup first for the country-guardian
> of the East Danes, bid him (be) blithe at the partaking of beer, beloved of men; he thrived in lust
> for feasting and the mead-cup, triumphant king. She went around, lady of Helmings, to each,
> warriors and youth, giving the rich-cup, until it occurred that, to Beowulf, the ring-adorned
> queen advanced a mead-cup.]

Once again, we see the assertion of female beauty in terms of wealth. Wealhtheow is

bejeweled by her husband and walks through the hall serving her husband's men. Her physicality

becomes a symbol for the people, unifying both young and old, stranger and local through the

ability to receive tribute from Hrothgar's wife. Through the ritual act of sharing the mead-cup,

"Wealhtheow, as the image of the body politic, acts in her capacity of the peace-weaver" and

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[17] "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory"

exercises some agency (insofar as she is not confined to the bench during the feasting) but must utilize her agency within the confines of proper hosting and lord/underling relations (Olesiejko 107). In short, she must perform the role detailed to her by her husband; the wife becomes a symbol of wealth, of peace, of the state of the community while lacking her own interiority. As a result, the mead-passing is *from* her but never *for* her; Wealhtheow is purposefully excluded from the homosocial space of the hall while simultaneously supporting the interaction with her labor.

However, women in the canon are not merely tied to their patriarchal sidelines. *Judith* grants its titular protagonist the warrior-agency granted to male heroes throughout the corpus. *Beowulf* also extends this privilege to Grendel's mother, allowing her to engage in violence and the legal framework, and thus removing the complete gendering of heroics as strictly male endeavors. This rare performance of femininity introduces the masculine warrior virtues of bravery, generosity, and action by violating the otherwise invisible and arbitrary classification; for instance, "with the exception of *Waldere*, women do not appear in any other battle scene in the extant Old English poetry, and in *Beowulf*'s feast scenes only two royal women appear" because these masculine virtues are gatekept from bleeding into other aspects of society (Mullally 270). Without the intrusion into performances where women do not belong, we could not construct such a complete picture of what the competing, masculine performance entails.

For Judith, her gender subversion comes from her beheading Holofernes and taking on his property (and therefore his status). When Holofernes seeks to possess Judith, enforcing his licentious desires to own upon her, she preys upon his 'failure' as a man and a leader – his drunkenness results in his passing out before enacting his desire – and forcibly 'feminizes' Holofernes into a position of inaction. She takes hold of him aggressively, positioning him: "gen am ða þone hæðenan mannan / fæste be feaxe sinum, teah hyne folmum wið hyre weard /

bysmerlice ond þone bealofullan" [she then took the hateful man fast by the hair, dragging him

towards her with her hands shamefully and balefully] (*Judith*, Lines 98b-100). Judith takes on

the masculine role in their interaction, drawing him towards her rather than waiting to be acted

upon. There is also the implication of seduction, with "bysmerlice" meaning "disgracefully,

irreverently" and, given the context of sexual violence permeating the tent, a shameful or

disgraceful act would certainly entail shirking the delicate woman persona to seduce this pagan

man.[18] In fact, her maneuvering of Holofernes presents Judith as the aggressor, sexually forward

and forcing him into the role of the object. We see this role reversal continue into his death

scene:

> Sloh ða wundenlocc
> þone feondsceaðan fagum mece,
> heteþoncolne, þæt heo healfne forcearf
> þone sweoran him, þæt he on swiman læg,
> druncen ond dolhwund. Næs ða dead þa gyt,
> ealles orsawle; sloh ða eornoste
> ides ellenrof oðre siðe
> þone hæðenan hund þæt him þæt heafod wand
> forð on ða flore (lines 103b-111b).
> [Then she struck, wavy-haired, her enemy who does harm with adorned sword, hostile-
minded, that she half cut out his neck, so that he in swoon lay, drunk and wounded. Not quite
dead yet, not yet without a soul, then the courageous lady struck, for a second time, the heathen
hound so that his head rolled forth on the floor.]

Holofernes is paralyzed by the objectification, swooning like a woman would under these

threats. He also ceases to appear as a person; instead, the poem only presents us with pieces of

Holofernes—his neck, his head, his body, his soul—as both a method of showcasing the violence

of his murder and the "wrongness" of a man disappearing into a series of physical traits rather

than presenting his personality and accomplishments. As a result, we can glean the cultural

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[18] "Bysmor-líce." *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online.*

valorization of male individuality and domination through the subversion of Holofernes' domain into that of Judith's.

Grendel's mother also subverts gender roles through violence but gains a different kind of power—the legal negotiation of her own space. Grendel's mother renegotiates the boundaries of her territory after her son's wound during the fight with Beowulf; she invades the hall in vengeance, slaughtering Æschere and removing his head for good measure. Her fury parallels the cause against Grendel; she is a "wiggryre wife" [war-terror woman] and wholly dedicated to avenging her son, much like how Beowulf avenges his deceased companions. The head becomes a form of marking, sitting "on þam holmcliffe" [on the cliff by the water-side] and looking down upon Beowulf, Hrothgar, and the war-band as they arrive for revenge (*Beowulf*, line 1421). Separated and speared, it provides a visceral reminder of the conflict between Grendel's family and the Spear-Danes.

By placing the head atop the cliffs, "it marks the boundary between the world of men and the ogres' domain" with everything beneath it, the mere and the cavern of giants, belonging to Grendel and his ilk (Porck & Stolk 525). Following this assertion, Helen Appleton provides similar language surrounding boundary charters. Appleton's research uncovers descriptions of land tracts with distinctive landmarks, using directions such as "æfter foss to þa heafod stoccan" [after the Roman road to the head stake] for clarification (Porck & Stolk 525). These charters treat the inclusion of heads as an easily recognizable feature and permanent enough to use for boundary negotiations, much like large trees or a fence. Due to its location, near the road, the head stake also becomes a matter of visibility. Grendel's mother places her hard-won head on the cliffs atop her home, allowing for guests to see the marker from the approach; her decision echoes the legal charters, "marking the boundaries of a community's estate" and ensuring that

travelers know when they pass from one lord's territory into the next (Porck & Stolk 525). Head stakes even provide an assurance of justice within a town, with "Anglo-Saxon execution cemeteries" resting close to the roads in a similar fashion to the Romans (Porck & Stolk 525-426). Thus, the head of Æschere carries the cultural connotations of justice from Grendel's mother and reasserts her domain against the rising tide of Hrothgar's court.

Others such as Kevin Kiernan assert that Grendel's mother takes a trophy rather than a boundary marker. However, there is precedence in early English documents for these stakes to possess dual meanings. "De obsessione Dunelmi" recounts the aftermath of a broken siege; to celebrate his survival, king "Uhtred [commands his men] to have the best-looking heads of the fallen Scots to be brought to Durham" for display (Porck & Stolk 525-526). These heads not only commemorate the king's victory, but also provide an example of the justice that awaits within; the city takes a life for a life. We already know that Grendel and his mother rule their mere in a parallel to Hrothgar and Heorot; Grendel's family carries the blood of Cain, "þone cwealm gewræc / ece drihten" [who wreaks destruction, pain's lord], resulting in their banishment to the outskirts of society (*Beowulf*, lines 107b-108a). These monsters become the opposing forces to human society, holding sovereignty over the wild and dangerous moors and their underwater abode. This account provides an analogue to Grendel's mother and her stake, acknowledging her desire for revenge while also providing a firm, physical boundary to protect her family. At the same time, the poet himself establishes a clear metaphorical boundary between civilization and the wilds of the monster-folk; Grendel's mother must take a more physical approach once her son arrives home, injured. She resorts to the language of legality, setting heads around her home as both a warning and a reassertion of her land's boundaries.

She transforms Hrothgar's thane into an object on a map in the same way that Grendel was disembodied during his encounter with Beowulf; "heo under heolfre genam / cuþe folme" [she under gore clearly drove the hand] and in return, she objectifies one of their men, turning his head into her prize and border marker (lines 1302-1303). Mechanically, the poet's invoking of the gory and visceral nature of these markers also reminds the audience of how a dead man and dead monster share similar form: meat. Both Grendel's arm and Æschere's head are hunks of gore once separate from the spirit; these pieces are no better than objects even without the legally charged significance. Who, then, can tell the difference between the "aldorþegn" and the "wæteregesan" when both bleed and die (lines 1260a & 1308a)? Both transform into objects, marking the sites of conflicted territory for the survivors; Grendel's mother forces the legal narrative to consider her claim to sovereignty over her family and land—thus revealing that ownership of property and family members is an otherwise masculine trait, hard won by a woman claiming her rights through violence.

However, these violent acts of renegotiating participation serve only to create the subversive woman as an outsider, who must rely on male traits (and thus un-genders herself) to engage in the orthodox structure. The men around Judith, for instance, admire her killing of Holofernes but the poet's language implies a wrongness surrounding a violent woman. Instead of praising her virtue and prowess, as they would a man, the speaker weaves in the passivity of Judith under God's watch; she loses her agency because of her faith. Grendel's mother, too, is punished by her text; she dies and nearly immediately loses the territory she fought so hard to preserve. The only one who does not subvert the dynamic, Wealhtheow, survives her poem much in the same way that she began—in the shadow of her husband, with the fragility of her position readily apparent.

The Man Under the Law

With the gendering of commerce and oath-taking as masculine traits, men must have a realm to discuss violations of social boundaries. Law steps in, doling out punishment and mediating property rights; engagement in the legal system becomes a new stage for men, embodying a socially acceptable field to exercise the warrior mindset during times of peace. As a result, the desire for justice becomes a distinctly masculine trait and an extension of his ferocity – embellished with a desire for justice and properly mitigated social relations.

We can best glean the literary example of man's justice through *Beowulf* and surviving legal documents. Despite its appearance as an adventure poem, *Beowulf*'s poet includes multiple invocations of justice as something measured through law. Through the fight for Heorot, the speaker reveals man's anxiety surrounding his "londrihtes" [land rights] and the intrusion of others into his personal property. Through the fight against the dragon, Wiglaf ties proper masculine conduct to the right to participate in courts of law or other communal activities that determine the community's future. Finally, through Grendel's exclusion from society, the speaker reveals the punishments for repeated violations of the law, for treating your fellow man as nothing more than prey.

Beowulf reveals its legal grounding through the language it utilizes. Stefan Jurasinski describes the poet as having combined literary and legal motifs to communicate the social stakes that Grendel, his mother, and the dragon threaten. Once such example is the shared ideology of communal versus private property through "folcstede," "folcscare," and "folcland" [folk place, nation, land of the people] (20). Klaeber's glossary of *Beowulf* provides these terms as "folk share" and "folk stead," thus comparing Hrothgar's building of Heorot to a Germanic common

law project; the land serves the will of the people, in this case creating a beloved hall for

community gathering and celebration (377). The idea of communal property within *Beowulf*

stems from "Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici," which presents these folk-centered phrases as

a distinct, legal category like the modern German term for communal property (Jurasinski 54). A

16th-century work continues the interpretation of some unified community property, translating

"folcland" into "land of the folk, held according to the common law and without a charter"

(Jurasinski 57). As a result, we gain the category of public property as a benefit of contributing to

society; a man's fealty to his king, crucial in his social web, provides him with the usage of this

shared space.

Since land belonging to the people holds a legal meaning along with the cultural notion

of public access, *Beowulf* invites the reader to think of Heorot as one of those spaces. After all, it

is open to Hrothgar's "winemagas" [loving kinsmen], both "geongum ond ealdum" [young and

old] as one of their shared spaces for feasting and telling stories (*Beowulf,* lines 65 and 72). That

begs the question: who is not included under common law?

The language surrounding the Danes suggests that everyone takes part in the hall equally,

with one major exception: Grendel. When he arrives in Heorot, there is a complete mood and

tone shift within the narrative. Grendel is "Caines cynne" [Cain's kin] rather than a member of

the "folc," isolating him from the charter-less, communal space (line 107). As a descendant of

the first murderer, Grendel bears the mark of social ostracization because of his ancestor's

inability to rein in his dark, wrong, evil urges. Placing Grendel's arm at the entrance of Heorot

declares the hall as an untouchable zone, echoing the poet's more spiritual condemnation of the

fiend. Grendel, although able to slaughter men by the dozen without retaliation, "no he þone

gifstol gretan moste / maþþu for metode, ne his myne wisse" [he could not touch the gift-seat nor

its treasures in the presence of God, nor His love] (lines 168-169). These lines echo Christian morality; sinners find themselves unable to approach the seat of God, the embodiment of justice, much in the same way Grendel may not approach the seat of Hrothgar, the lawgiver.

As a result, there are in-groups and out-groups within the general population, leading to the potential for legal repercussions. Grendel's status unifies the spiritual condemnation and the legal side of the work, with Grendel's heritage and blatant exclusion from public spaces doubling down on his isolation and motive for revenge. Like the exiled man and the oath-breaking man, Grendel represents a failure to measure up to the masculine ideal.

Grendel's invasion of Heorot becomes the poet's method of demonstrating improper conduct in the face of exile from other men. Wrath is the central pillar of disordered masculinity, inverting the expectation of warrior-like conduct against enemies and shifting the focus onto your fellow man. Society constructs a site of collaboration and peace, where thanes and retainers may hang up their weapons for the night; Grendel, a "feond on helle" [fiend in hell], forces himself into the paradigm by lashing out in a hall of camaraderie (line 101). He hates the song and dance – "se þe in þystrum bad, / þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde / hludne in healle" [it put him in a bad mind / that he heard the loud music in the hall] – that indicates the homosocial comforts contained within the zone of exclusion (lines 87b-89a). The joys of life are anathema to the wrathful man, personified in Grendel.

In response to this frustration at exclusion, Grendel inverts the expectation of loyalty to one's lord and wrathfully sets out to assert himself; Grendel rules over "fifelcynnes eard" [the monster-race's earth] for all that entails, "fen ond fæsten" [mire and entrenchments] marking his lands, while the Scyldings under Hrothgar inherit the land for a new mead-hall, a "medoærn micel" [great mead-hall] in their victory (lines 69 and 104). This background transforms

Grendel's attacks into a jealous, political move; he purposely violates the sovereignty of Hrothgar's home, open only to his people. In a prideful separation from those who exclude him, Grendel is "grim ond grædig" [grim and greedy] in his brutality, coveting the blood of these men and their places in the social system (line 121). While a retainer lends his support to his liege-lord in exchange for feasting within the hall, Grendel inverts that equation; his "guþcræft" [war-power] steals the strength and replaces it with terror (line 127). He becomes an anti-king, spilling the blood of thanes for his own amusement and coveting the hall he does not earn. This is a direct, open violation of Hrothgar's lands, motivated by the very same anomie that *The Wanderer* invokes with the exiled man; violent outbursts become a foil to the stalwart acceptance of man's role and leads him into constant conflict with the governing society.

As a result of disordered masculinity, the poem dedicates its content to the legal negotiation process surrounding Grendel's wrath and pride – henceforth gendered as unmasculine expressions of frustrations. These negotiations include reasserting ownership and punishing the offender. Pre-Conquest charters describe land boundaries marked with "heafod stocc" [head post] as markers. Grendel freely passes back and forth between Heorot and his mere without any major resistance; there are no markers that he abides during his crime spree. It takes an active stand-off, with Grendel losing "earm ond eaxle" [arm and shoulder], for Hrothgar to finally reassert his boundaries (line 835). Through an expression of correct loyalty, Beowulf seemingly sequesters the arm as a trophy, a memory of his victory – "tires to tacen" [token of glory](line 1654).

However, "Grendeles hond" [Grendel's hand] ends up hanging under the "under geapne hrof" [under open roof] of Heorot, in full view of the compound (lines 926 & 836b). Porck and Stolk describe how "entering a community" that contains disembodied boundary markers

demonstrates severe punishment for rule-breaking; those "leaving a community" must be on their guard for the danger of the borderlands (526). Comparing the arm to Beowulf's boasts of trophies from battle, Grendel's body parts function more as physical representations of criminal repercussions than anything else. By severing an offending arm, Beowulf hangs it high as a physical marker of what is off-limits to Grendel. Porck and Stolk claim that the arm-marker's positioning stems from Beowulf's intimate knowledge of how Grendel and his kind define their borders. They examine closely the section where Beowulf reassures Hrothgar of how "[he will not] ymb mines ne þearft / lices foerme leng sorgian" [need to mourn or lay out my body] (lines 449b-450). Beowulf's understanding of the law tells him that territory disputes are subject to the removal of body parts to mark new delineation; through textual cruces like "hafalan hydan" [hidden head] and "mearcaþ" [to mark out] in this section, we can glean that fighting a boundary dispute with an opposing society results in the physical and visceral remarking of the status quo (lines 446a & 450a). This reading of Beowulf's reassurance provides a much more ominous interpretation of the nightly invasions of Heorot. Not only does Grendel murder the thanes and retainers, "eal gefeormod / fet ond folma" [all eaten / foot and hand], but he also purposely paints the hall with blood as an act of claiming the building for his own (lines 744b-745a).

Additionally, since the offending limb is an arm, there are underlying associations with the codes of King Æthelstan; his codes "prescribe that the hand of a debaser of coins is to be cut off as punishment and that the severed hand is to be placed on top of the perpetrator's mint shop" in retaliation for lost coins and their value (Porck & Stolk 532) This comparison seems especially apt once we consider the language of commodity exchange surrounding Grendel's attacks. The poet acknowledges Grendel's crime under common law, wryly pointing out the requirement to pay for every life lost in the hall: "sibbe ne wolde / wiþ manna hwone mægenes

Deniga, / feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian" [(he) would not, with any man of the Dane's army, withdraw deadly evil, settle conflict with fees] (lines 154b-156b). Since Grendel exists outside of society, he has no reason to pay weregild for his victims; the Danes expect his payment despite never including him in other protections of the law. As a result, the arm becomes a substitute for monetary exchange. By virtue of Æthelstan's decree, taking an arm for the loss of life evens the score without ever invoking the king's judgment.

Grendel's nightly invasions assert his dominance over both the land and Danish society. Not only is it a legal violation of sovereignty, but Grendel also 'violates' the right to life of these dead men. In contrast to Heorot's glory, this monstrous fiend exerts his will, "reoc ond reþe" [savage and fierce] and takes no prisoners in his might (line 122). It corrupts the meaning of Heorot through the criminality of his actions; it becomes a monument to slaughter rather than a celebration of battle victory. We watch the Scyldings learn how it feels to be on the other end of the blade, so to speak. They must retaliate to his misdeeds but are socially bound by the legal codes of men.

Legally mediated masculinity also encourages consideration of Wiglaf's speech to the "betrayers," the men who ran while their lord stayed behind to fight the dragon. We must hold the example of the deserters from *The Battle of Maldon;* Wiglaf's disdain for the unmasculine men who fear death at the dragon's claws. These lines read as a formula, legally renegotiating the status of these cowards:

> Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu,
> eall eþelwyn eowrum cynne,
> lufen alicgean; londrihtes mot
> þære mægburge monna æghwylc
> ide hweorfan, syþþan æþelingas
> feorran grefricgean fleam eowerne,
> domleasan dæd (lines 2884-2890a).

[Now shall the receiving of treasure and the gifting of swords for all your kin, king's joys cease; (of) landrights must your kindred, every man, be deprived when foreign princes learn of your inglorious deed.]

Wiglaf follows a clear structure, addressing the initial displeasure and then strips the men of the social status; their families no longer hold the gifted lands earned prior to the displeasure, therefore removing the socio-economic benefits of being an "æþeling" [prince] in a very stiff, formalized construction. This echoes the observations of Tacitus, while writing about the German tribes, who reports that "to abandon one's shield is the greatest shame" and any such coward may not participate in "religious rites or councils" (Jurasinski 34). It provides a unified legal precedent for the poet; historically and culturally, these men lack the standing with which to participate in a moot or other court of law and Wiglaf draws upon those to isolate the cowards from the rest of the Geats.

Notice how Wiglaf emphasizes the "londrihtes" of men, transforming the situation into a moral and legal question of who deserves land and participation within the social hierarchy. There is precedence for condemning cowardice within the work; while not in the same legal context, Beowulf himself, upon introduction to the Danish court, defines himself as a man "not unlytel" [exceedingly not small (brave)] as a way of asserting his status as a monster-slaying candidate (line 498a). He explicitly gains status within the hall upon delivering the proof of his bravery, while his men, 50 years later, have no such demonstration to speak of. A man's status becomes a negotiation of legal right to land, based upon one's merit within the society. This also permits us to read "folcscaru" as "the notion of ancestral land" rather than a simple, shared plot (Jurasinski pp, 79). It adds another fragment of legal code to the work, combining the legal doctrine of birthright with Hrothgar's desire for a meeting hall. Through the legal invocation of property rights, Wiglaf, Hrothgar, and Beowulf weigh their masculinity in an expectation of

representation and possession. To perform masculinity now means to perform ownership and stewardship over the land and the people living on it. Man's sense of justice requires him to posture as a provider within his social network.

The Man Before God

The pre-Conquest man is not only stalwart, loyal, warlike, and honorable, but he is also a Christian stoic, driven by his faith to avoid the spiritual pitfalls of material goods and sinful lifestyles. His other traits become expressions of Christian morality that lead him along an upright path with the potential for reward in heaven, whether he intends it or not. As a member of a society without boundaries between the secular and the non, the influenced man finds himself reproducing cultural Christianity due to the archetypes he surrounds himself with.

Essentially, the construction of masculinity is deeply connected with expressions of faith due to the religious domination of literary production; the careful weaving together of secular masculine markers and Christian expectations for men as expressed in literature becomes the cornerstone that buttresses the arch of pre-Conquest archetype building. We glean this representation of cultural Christian stoicism from examples such as *The Seafarer* (henceforth referred to as *Sea*). We return to the image of a solitary man traversing the seas with a new understanding of his mindset. Rather than expressing his stalwart dedication inward or even outward for social gain, I argue, along with Olof Arngart, that the poem functions as an

exemplum and parable for its audience, guiding them towards a 'right' desire to live for the

heavenly rewards rather than the earthly ones without upsetting his pre-existing values (251).[19]

To function as an exemplum, the speaker opens the poem by establishing his expertise; he

relays a miserable, worldly life to draw in the reader with the verisimilitude of their own lives

reflected in the poetry:

> Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,
> siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum
> earfoðhwile oft þrowade,
> bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,
> gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela (*The Seafarer*, lines 1-6)
> [I can recite a lay of truth about myself, relate experiences, how I often in days of toil
suffered a time of hardship. I have experienced bitter breast-care, explored in a ship many abodes
of care][20]

Our poet provides his speaker with the badge of authenticity by invoking the speaker's

own experiences in the opening lines. His experiences – "ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ / winter

wunade wræccan lastum" [I, miserable and sad, wandered the ice-cold seas in winter, on the path

of exile] – invoke the sympathy of his reader, perhaps playing on their own knowledge of the

frightful and chaotic world around them (lines 15-16).[21] The shared experience of a miserable

world allows the poet to slip in his own philosophy, encouraging the virtue of remaining

steadfast with a new goal – eternal life in Heaven – rather than enduring the difficult times on

Earth for the benefits of Earthly riches (both literal and metaphorical). To that end, the speaker's

invocation of bitter experiences and the constant journey of ships recalls the stalwart man in *The*

Wanderer; the two works become parallel experiences of masculinity—one more physical and

visceral, the other more focused on life beyond Earth. This is where cultural Christianity thrives

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[19] Arngart's postscripts invokes the subject of genre by summing up the 20th century's argument over the function of *The Seafarer* as a homily-text.

[20] This translation for *The Seafarer* was assisted by Professor Siân Echard.

[21] Assisted by Professor Siân Echard.

as the two works' similarities draw them closer together in the mind, allowing for explicit

theology from *The Seafarer* to influence the expectations of men in *The Wanderer.*

Cultural Christianity, in the context of *Sea,* takes the form of what Arngart describes as a

desire to "persuade rather than condemn" the secular mindset (Arngart 250). Successful

integration of heroic values into Christian doctrine, our accepted status quo for Medieval

masculinities, requires positive reinforcement and guidance from the poet to establish the

connection between religious expectation and secular ones.

> Swylce geac monað geomran reorde,
> singeð sumeres weard, sorge beodeð
> bitter in breosthord. Þæt se beorn ne wat,
> sefteadig secg, hwæt þa sume dreogað
> þe þa wræclastas widost lecgað (lines 53-57).
> > [So the cuckoo with miserable voice laments, sings [as] summer's ward, bids
> > sorrow bitter in [the] heart. The man knows not, the man lucky in things, what some
> > endure, those who stay in exile's path.]

Unlike the harsh moralizing we saw in *The Battle of Maldon, The Seafarer*'s poet offers a

moment of solidarity for his readers. He invokes the knowledge gap between rich and poor men,

between men who fit into society and those on the outskirts. There is no condemnation of the

lucky man; the very invocation of the word luck even offers some approval of the good life

offered to that man. Instead, the work positions itself to offer comfort for the solitary man in this

life. The poet guides us through the psychology of separation once more, easing us into a

common image before turning to provide the Christian stoicism to ground the man through

hardship. He winds the desire for honoring the stalwart trait of masculinity into the devotional

idea of living a Christian life – a direct invention of cultural Christianity.

The explicit moralizing arrives later, again without condemnation of the choices of

others.

> Forþon me hatran sind
> Dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif
> læne on londe (lines 64b-66a).
>   [For the Lord's joys are warmer to me than this dead life, fleeting, temporary on
the land.][22]

The writer's work now becomes influenced by their invested Christianity; the monastic culture shaped the stories circulated to influence men in the right direction. Essentially, poems discussing masculine virtues becomes a men's bible study at the literary level. Implementing heroic archetypes and centering their poetic concerns around men's issues, the writer of *The Seafarer* coaxes his audience to consider Christianity as a more positive framework for their lives. "Dryhtnes dreamas" become a mantra for focusing the man's stalwartness for the future, shifting away from the despair of worldly woes.

At the same time, positive reinforcement does not guarantee the association of cultural images of masculinity with faith-based practices. The poet invests space to play on man's fear of failure; he outlines the worst possible outcomes before patching the concerns with corresponding Christian acceptance of eventual eternal life.

> Yldo him on fareþ onsyn blacað
> gomelfeax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
> æþelinga bearn eorþan forgiefene.
> Ne mæg him þonne se flæschoma þonne him þæt feorg losað
> ne swete forswelgan ne sar gefelan
> ne hond onhreran ne mid hyge þencan (lines 91-96).
> [Old age arrives, makes him pale, the grey-haired mourns, knows that his old friends, sons of princes, to the earth (have been) given forth. His body weakens, no longer strong, loses that soul. Nor may he taste sweetness, nor feel pain, nor hand stir, nor with mind think.]

Virility and the masculine warrior archetype crumble away in the end, invoking the fear of death within the poet's audience. The repetitive listing of the loss of bodily sensation

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[22] Translation assisted by Stephen Hopkins.

gradually deprives men of their value within society; *The Seafarer's* speaker must break down

the secular value of a man, through his body and mind, to refocus his worth on performing

Christian mindsets while he traverses the world.

      The culmination of this conscious redirection of the warrior mindset towards religion

arrives in the form of the poet's final instructions to the reader.

> we þonne eac tilien, þæt we to moten
> in þa ecan eadignesse
> þær is lif gelong in lufan Dryhtnes,
> hyht in heofonum. Þæs sy þam Halgan þonc
> þæt he usic geweorþade, wuldres Ealdor
> ece Dryhten, in ealle tid. Amen (lines 119-124).
> [Then we all must toil (so) that we may go to the eternal happiness. There is a consequent
life in the Lord's love, hope in Heaven. Thus, thanks be to God that he treasured us, Father of
glory, eternal Lord, for all time. Amen.]

      After reminding men of their fates without God, a time where their hard-won virtues fail,

the speaker focuses their attention on the fatherly love of God. He reminds us of the eternal bliss

of Heaven and the consistent, properly performed duty of the Father. Playing upon the language

of masculine exchange, the word "geweorþade" [to set a price on] places the man in the position

of objectification and masculine headship; however, unlike for women controlled by their earthly

fathers, the Heavenly Father's treasured children receive a place in his kingdom forever. Thus,

the virtue of exchange bolsters the Church's theology of prosperity in Heaven. Without

condemning his audience's worldview outright, the *Seafarer* poet brings the secular values of

masculinity into the Christian culture; even seemingly secular works become a canvas for the

highly religious scribes and authors operating during this time. Through the influence of

literature on men, the pre-Conquest man reflects a Christian tint onto his deeply embedded

conception of masculinity.

Conclusion

Pre-Conquest men did not exist in a vacuum. Their self-perception, through studying their cultural archetypes in literature, carries within it the complex inner workings of negotiating a proto-national figure. The warrior-man is strong, yes, but also carefully balances social expectations from his friends, his lord, and his church in a familiar tapestry. Performing medieval English masculinity burdens the actor and his audience with pressure to conform, supporting those around him with a stalwart consistency.

The man must navigate the complex expectations of honor and oath-keeping from both peers and superiors. Literature promotes dedication to enforced social hierarchy; lords may expect men to give up their lives without question. Eadric and his companions, through their tragic final moments, fully surrender themselves to the performance of "right" manhood. The speaker of *The Seafarer* permits intense dwelling on the dangers of our world but embraces the expectation of Christianity wholeheartedly, despite his seeming initial resistance to projecting a Christian eye onto all his experiences. Beowulf must honor the social convention of boasting and medieval networking through his speech-driven gender performance in Hrothgar's court. The expectations of ideal masculinity and its attached policing provides our archetypal heroes with a stage to demonstrate their extraordinary skills. Before a hero can slay monsters, drive back an invasion, or weather the monstrous storm of exile, he must undergo training to perform his own gendered identity. Acknowledging this effort in building national heroes, medieval literature becomes shockingly resonant for our own time.

At the same time, we demonstrate how the embodiment of masculinity and internalizing of its traits does not guarantee a position of power. Grendel performs his role of ruling the land, stewarding his mother, and engaging in warfare, yet his actions run counter culturally to the

interests of the collective and earns his exile. Judith performs the warrior archetype but still must bend under the scrutiny of clerical surveillance, forcing her to cease her performance of masculine traits and readopt more traditionally feminine ones. Godric exhibits loyalty to a fault, expressing the individualistic drive to survive at the expense of the collective web. His ambition to survive a losing battle, led by Byrhtnoth's excessive pride, brands Godric a traitor and therefore less masculine. Emasculation becomes a punishment for violating the early stages of building a national archive of right conduct.

Our newly framed archive leads us here: where does the collective heroic construction leave gender relations in pre-Conquest England? Is there room to salvage the man from his training? We must learn to read our canon with enforced performance at the forefront; doing so, as demonstrated by reading Eadric, Godric, Beowulf, Cynewulf, and every man – named or anonymous – holds the key in moving past our initial prejudice of Old English literature as representing a hegemonic portrayal of enforced masculinity. Instead, enforced masculinity is an always changing marker, with differing goal-posts that ebb and flow as cultural anxieties rise and fall.

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