

Women at War in Early Medieval Poetry and Late Medieval Romance

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ABSTRACT

In early Medieval English poetry and late Medieval romance, there are multiple roles violent women perform. They can be protagonist, antagonist, and supporting character. They prove to be active characters with strength, skill, intelligence, and power. In early Medieval English poetry, Grendel's mother from *Beowulf* and Judith from *Judith* share certain noble traits. Grendel's mother is an antagonist of the titular hero, but she is described as a noblewoman, honorable, loyal to her family, and a fierce fighter. Judith is often considered a hagiographic heroine, but *Judith* paints her in a more secular manner as intelligent, politically powerful, and proud. Lynet from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* may not be as violent as the other women in this study, but she is equally powerful and intelligent. These women show different ways in which violent women characters had agency and active roles in the texts they inhabit.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In early Medieval English (500 - 1066 AD) poetry and late Medieval (1300 - 1500 AD) romance stories, there are multiple roles violent women fill. They can be protagonist, antagonist, and supporting character. They prove to be active, independent characters with strength, skill, intelligence, and power. In early Medieval English poetry, Grendel's mother from *Beowulf* (975 - 1025 AD) and Judith from *Judith* (975 - 1025 AD) share certain noble traits. Grendel's mother is an antagonist of the titular hero, but she is described as a noblewoman: honorable, loyal to her family, and a fierce fighter. Judith is often considered a spiritual or religious heroine, but *Judith* paints her in a more secular manner as intelligent, politically powerful, and proud. Lynet from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1485 AD) may not be as violent as the other women in this study, but she is equally powerful and intelligent. These women show different ways in which violent women characters had independent and active roles in the texts they inhabit.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There are a number of positive examples of women at war in medieval literature that show a variety of narrative roles and relationships to violence. These roles include protagonist, antagonist, and supporting character. Judith and Grendel's mother in Early Medieval English poetry and Lynet of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* are all women at war, sharing some qualities, but with different values and motivations and different grounds for praise. In particular, they vary in how they participate in martial endeavors and how independently they act. Judith, Grendel's mother and Lynet are disparate examples of a Medieval English literary tradition of women who could achieve martial power independent of men, as well as jointly with men, and who, in varying degrees and descriptions, could use violence and power effectively to accomplish their goals.

Grendel's mother and Judith reveal there was more than one way to be a violent woman in Early Medieval English poetry, as opposed to a fairly passive peace-weaver. Violent women in a variety of literary roles are portrayed positively and praised. The saints are perhaps the most obvious: *Juliana*, *Elene*, and *Judith*. The works bear their names, and they are the victorious protagonists. *Judith* is the most interesting here due to her more complex portrayal which blends the religious, martial, and political in ways that emphasize her violence as a warrior, her power, and her public role as a noblewoman. *Beowulf's* Grendel's mother is a major figure who, despite her placement as antagonist to Beowulf, is described in a manner that is being increasingly recognized in scholarship as positive. Later Medieval English literature adapted this tradition of violent women. Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* has several violent women. Lynet has an active role which spans King Arthur's court, adventuring with Sir Gareth, and the

social circle of her family, and one in which her activity is most often defined in social rather than magical terms.

Scholars like Christine Fell¹ have long since dismantled the simplistic idea that early medieval English cultures were *machista* and suppressive of women and their role that they were little more than prizes or flat characters in life and literature. Despite this, popular and scholarly works often limit female figures in the roles they can play, or demonize female characters who assert themselves. As a literary example, Seamus Haney, in his excellent and dramatic translation of *Beowulf*, calls Grendel's mother a "monstrous hell-bride."² In cinema, Robert Zemeckis' 2008 *Beowulf* portrays Grendel's mother (Angelina Jolie) as a shape-shifting dragon-woman.³ Even in scholarship on Grendel's mother after the research of scholars like Signe M. Carlson,⁴ there is still work done that considers Grendel's mother as a monster. William Sayers does intriguing work looking at connections between tropes in *Beowulf* and Irish and Icelandic stories of female monsters.⁵ Jane Chance considered Grendel's mother to be an inverse of what

¹ Christine E. Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, London: British Museum Publications, 1984.

² *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000): 89.

³ Robert Zemeckis, Steve Starkey, Jack Rapke, Neil Gaiman, Roger Avary, Ray Winstone, Anthony Hopkins, et al. *Beowulf*. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2008.

⁴ Signe M. Carlson, "The Monsters of Beowulf. Creations of Literary Scholars," *The Journal of American Folklore* 80, no. 318 (1967): 357-364. See also Melinda J. Menzer, "Aglæcwif (Beowulf 1259A): Implications for -wif Compounds, Grendel's Mother and Other Aglæcan," *English Language Notes* 34 (September 1996): 1-6. Or Christine Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1992): 1-16. Or Keith P. Taylor, "Beowulf 1259a: The Inherent Nobility of Grendel's Mother," *English Language Notes* 31, issue 3 (March 1994): 13-26. Or M. Wendy Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster: the Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," *English Studies* 89, no. 5 (October 2008): 503-523.

⁵ William Sayers, "Grendel's Mother, Icelandic Grýla and Irish Nechta Scéne: Eviscerating Fear," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16/17 (1996/1997): 256-268.

an early Medieval English woman was,⁶ and both Renee R. Trilling and James Paz consider her negatively through psychoanalytic readings.⁷

This is not to say these medieval cultures were matriarchal or examples of equality and independence, but rather such things are complicated, nuanced, and often on a broad spectrum rather than an either-or situation, which is the trap of generalizations. Judith, Grendel's mother, and Lynet are three examples of the ways these nuances could exist.

Grendel's mother restrains her violence in ways that neither her son Grendel nor the hero Beowulf demonstrate. More than either of them, Grendel's mother strictly follows the cultural code of the blood-feud. In doing so, she avenges her family and shows a certain virtue that can be praised by both the pagan Germanic culture as well as the newer Christian culture. Queen Wealhtheow, in contrast, functions as a powerful and influential character who acts both independently and in conjunction with King Hrothgar, but she attempts to protect her children through social and political means. The two taken together show a range of feminine action, often praised or at least acknowledged for its worth.

Unlike the women in *Beowulf* Judith is not acting to protect her children. She is the apocryphal heroine who liberates her city by seducing and decapitating the enemy commander, Holofernes. While described as a chaste saint in the Bible, her portrayal in the early medieval English poem *Judith* is that of a powerful and attractive woman who is able to use social, political, and violent power to achieve her ends, and is praised and rewarded for it by her people

⁶ Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

⁷ Renee R. Trilling, "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 24 (2007): 1-20. And James, Paz, "Æshere's Head, Grendel's Mother and the Sword That Isn't a Sword: Unreadable Things in Beowulf," *Exemplaria* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 231-251.

and the narrator. She therefore combines some of the forms of activity that Grendel's mother and Wealhtheow use, but the religious context offers a new angle for assessing her deeds.

These female characters present women in both positive and powerful ways that associate them with all aspects of life: social, political, and martial. As literature moves from the early medieval English poetry to the end of the Medieval period and the chivalric romance literature of Sir Thomas Malory and others, there are some key differences in the literary roles and functions of female characters. Many things had changed from early to late Medieval: Christianity has grown and evolved; the early medieval English culture was mixed with both the Norse and Norman cultures during the times of the Vikings, the Dane-law, and the Norman Conquest; and there is the real and imaginative establishment and evolution of the nobility, knights and chivalry.

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* provides an excellent canvas for examining these changes and how female characters and their roles have changed and evolved. Lynet represents a female character that is powerful and influential in both society and politics. While she is a powerful figure in the story, she is not the protagonist, but a critical character whose actions and motivations shape the arc of the overall story. She also lacks a direct connection to violence; yet like Queen Wealhtheow, she still possesses an indirect connection in their ability to instigate, sanction, and reward the violence of men, as well as using the knights and kings for their own agendas.

Chapter 2: Grendel's Mother: A Mere Enemy

Ever since *Beowulf* was brought into literary criticism by J. R. R. Tolkien,⁸ its heroes and villains have been much studied, as befits the great characters in an epic poem. Grendel's mother has received a particularly wide range of study and portrayal, in part because she directly occupies so little of the text, and what little she does occupy does not tell us too much about who and what she is. Some scholars and translators describe her as a monster and others posit her as a more human character. A recent addition to the conversation of how to interpret Grendel's mother is the book by an established early medieval English scholar, Helen Damico, who looks at *Beowulf* as a contemporary allegory of the political situation in the 1000s-1050s.⁹ Some scholars have also suggested psychoanalytic interpretations of her female monstrosity.¹⁰

Some have questioned her evilness or suggested she has some noble aspects or comparisons.¹¹ When a comprehensive view is taken that includes all of these ideas, the result is Grendel's mother as a woman, noble, and, arguably, the best fighter in *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother has a heroic, active role as a noble opponent, rather than an evil, monstrous villain. She

⁸ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics: and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Boston: Allen & Unwin (1983).

⁹ Helen Damico, *Beowulf and the Grendel-Kin: Politics & Poetry in Eleventh-Century England* (Morgantown, West Virginia University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Dana M. Oswald, "'Wigge under Wætere': Beowulf's Revision of the Fight with Grendel's Mother," *Exemplaria* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 63-82. Oswald argues that Beowulf tells different versions of his fight with Grendel's mother (as well as pointing out the inability to corroborate his story with Brecca, no one else saw the monsters) in order to distance his masculine heroic identity from her femininity. There are no witnesses, and Grendel's mother never says a word, but think the her silence and actions are in moral contrast to his revisionism. Trilling's article, discussed in detail later, also has a heavily psychoanalytic take on Grendel's mother.

¹¹ Signe M. Carlson, "The Monsters of Beowulf. Creations of Literary Scholars," *The Journal of American Folklore* 80, no. 318 (1967): 357-364. Also M. Wendy Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster: the Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," *English Studies* 89, no. 5 (October 2008): 503-523. Also Santanu Ganguly, "How Many Heroes are there in Beowulf: Rethinking of Grendel's Mother as 'Aglæcwif,'" *Rupkatha: Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2013): 161-166.

is a dark Valkyrie; the pagan but begrudgingly admirable and powerful arch-foe to the proto-Christian Beowulf.

This reading of Grendel's mother emphasizes her role as simply an enemy rather than a villain or monster. The dragon is literally a monster.¹² Grendel starts the feud by killing over noise and Christianity, so neither Grendel nor the dragon honor early medieval English or more general Germanic cultural ideas such as *comitatus* or the blood-feud. Yet Grendel's mother limits the scope of her violence to only taking a life for a life, fulfilling the feud tradition; despite the later indication she could have done more violence than her son. She also has various parallels with Beowulf, King Hrothgar, and Queen Wealtheow.

Many have suggested a human reading of Grendel's mother based on single words or short phrases.¹³ Further, there has been work looking at some of the parallels between Grendel's mother, King Hrothgar and Beowulf, comparing how they are all kingly, noble and heroic characters.¹⁴ For example, Grendel's mother is described as having a hall, treasure and an important sword, just as King Hrothgar has his Heorot Hall, much treasure and the famous sword Hrunting. She also follows the blood-feud tradition when Grendel is killed, as she takes an important person from Hrothgar's hall, both attacking Hrothgar and potentially enticing Beowulf into a trap where she can more easily kill him, the killer of her son. She also displays a type of

¹² The dragon is clearly a dragon; it is called a *wyrm*, which means "reptile, serpent, snake, dragon." See Hall, Clark & Meritt, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Fourth Edition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1962): 427. Also see *Beowulf* line 2221 for an instance of *wyrm*.

¹³ Keith P. Taylor, "Beowulf 1259a: The Inherent Nobility of Grendel's Mother," *English Language Notes* 31, issue 3 (March 1994): 13-26. Also Melinda J. Menzer, "Aglæcwif (Beowulf 1259A): Implications for -wif Compounds, Grendel's Mother and Other Aglæcan," *English Language Notes* 34 (September 1996): 1-6.

¹⁴ M. Wendy Hennequin, "Her Own Hall: Grendel's Mother as King," *Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 17 (2017): 13-26.

heroic honor in her pursuit of avenging Grendel's death, both in the act directly, as well as in not killing innocents or at random, like her son did.

Grendel's mother can also be compared to Beowulf as a hero, by looking at her strength, skill, weaponry and her sense of honor. Beowulf is supposedly the strongest man alive, with the grip of thirty men, and he easily rips Grendel's arm out of his shoulder. Yet when Beowulf enters Grendel's mother's hall, the combat is much more contested: both knock each other down, grip each other, and Grendel's mother even mounts Beowulf and stabs at him. It is only after a prolonged and difficult struggle that Beowulf ends up killing Grendel's mother. She, unlike her son, uses weapons and has great weapons in her hall. She and Beowulf both seek their blood-feud due, and neither seeks a *wergild*, or blood-price instead of actual blood.

Despite such similarities, there are also some notable contrasts between Grendel's mother and the male heroes. In many ways Grendel's mother breaks from what modern readers perceive as female roles (or even the idea of the early Medieval peace-weaver), when she is described as a ruler like Hrothgar, a warrior like Beowulf, and unlike some of the other prominent women in *Beowulf*, particularly Hrothgar's wife, Wealhtheow. Wealhtheow is described as a fairly passive peace-weaver who fulfills what are thought to be the female expectations of the time, and Grendel's mother seems to break all of those expectations.

If Grendel's mother was a mere human woman then she may have been an exile or from another tribe. The passage where Grendel's mother enters Heorot and takes Æshere opens up space to consider she may have been an exile. Killing anyone close to King Hrothgar would have been sufficient to satisfy the feud, or she could have chosen Æshere in particular, as King Hrothgar later describes how close they were to each other.

A lot of scholarship has reevaluated the translations of some of the key words and passages in *Beowulf* that are used to describe Grendel's mother, which allows for a more human characterization of her. Tolkien's description of Grendel as a hideous monster, and his monstrous mother (who does not herself receive any analysis by Tolkien) has affected many modern interpretations of them.¹⁵ Many of the translations of *Beowulf* follow the monster glossing of Grendel's mother, calling her a "monster woman," "angry sea-wolf," "witch" etc.¹⁶ Part of this is her thematic association with the other villains in the poem: Grendel and the dragon. One notable, and recent, exception is the translation by Maria Dahvana Headley, who translates the introduction of Grendel's mother simply as "Grendel's mother, warrior-woman, outlaw, meditated on misery."¹⁷ This translation is both more neutral to what may have been imagined at the time, as well as closer to a literal translation of the original words.

The first direct mention of Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* is central to a human reading of her.¹⁸ Because there is so little physical description of Grendel's mother, the accurate translation of the words and phrases that are used is critical to getting a picture of Grendel's mother as the original audiences would have understood them. The narrator says:

1258B Grendles mōdor,
 ides āglāc-wīf yrmþe gemunde,
 1260 sē þe wæter-egesan wunian scolde,
 Cealde strēamas siþðan Ca[in] wearð
 tō ecg-banan āngan brēþer,

¹⁵ Signe M. Carlson, "The Monsters of Beowulf: Creations of Literary Scholars," *The Journal of American Folklore* 80, no. 318 (1967): 357-364.

¹⁶ *Beowulf*. Trans. Howell D. Chickering, Jr. (New York, Anchor Books, 2006) 1259, 1506A, 1518. All translations are from Chickering's work, unless specified otherwise.

¹⁷ Maria Dahvana Headley, *Beowulf: A New Translation*, (New York, MCD x FSG Originals, 2020): 56.

¹⁸ Two lines prior (1256B) to this, the poem does mention her indirectly as *wrecend*, or "avenger," without any monstrous connotations, simply one who avenges or seeks revenge.

fæderen-mæge; hē þā fāg gewāt,
Morþre gemearcod, man-drēam flēon,
1265 wēsten warode. Þanon wōc fela
geōsceaft-gāsta;¹⁹

Chickering translates 1259A as “a monster woman.” Seamus Heaney, in his translation, writes more dramatically, “monstrous hell-bride.”²⁰ However, such translations are more reflective of the translators’ pre-conceived image of Grendel’s mother, rather than a strict reading of the words. *Ides*, outside of *Beowulf*, is universally translated as lady or noblewoman.²¹ A noteworthy *ides* is Judith, who will be discussed later. That a villain in *Beowulf* shares an adjective with the proto-Christian heroine is strong circumstantial evidence that, whatever Grendel’s mother is, there is something admirable or noble in her. *Wif*, also, in all other contexts means woman or wife.²² *Aglæc* is more ambiguous and contested; ranging from monster, to avenger, dangerous one or warrior.

If these two words universally mean woman, even noblewoman, then why does it mean something else here in *Beowulf*? Christine Alfano argues that Tolkien’s treatment and similar lexicography is responsible for some of the more monstrous and demonic renditions of the words

¹⁹ Grendel’s mother,/a monster woman, kept war-grief/deep in her mind, dwelt in terrible waters,/icy cold streams, since Cain raised the sword/against closest kinsman, put his blade to his brother; dripping with that fate, bright-stained outlawry,/gore-marked by murder, he fled man’s joys,/lived in wastelands. Out of that deep/and abysm of time came monsters, spirits.

²⁰ *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000): 89. However, it must be said Heaney was attempting not a literal, word-for-word, translation but a more emotional or dramatic translation.

²¹ Keith P. Taylor, “Beowulf 1259a: The Inherent Nobility of Grendel’s Mother,” *English Language Notes* 31, issue 3 (March 1994): 13-26.

²² Melinda J. Menzer, “Aglæcwif (Beowulf 1259A): Implications for -wif Compounds, Grendel’s Mother and Other Aglæcan,” 1996.

for Grendel's mother.²³ Tolkien gave such a reading; those who read and studied under Tolkien's view and text followed suite; and when those students became scholars and teachers they continued the same monstrous reading of Grendel's mother, without a careful study of her particularities.

The second part of the 1259A description of Grendel's mother is *āglācwif*. This is a compound word²⁴ comprised of *āglāc* and *wif*. *Āglāc* means "trouble, distress, oppression, misery, grief."²⁵ *Āglāca*, almost identical and a possible root word in the *āglācwif* compound, means "wretch, monster, demon, fierce enemy."²⁶ Thus there have been two dominant styles of translating this word: either as "monster-woman"²⁷ or a synonym thereof.

There are two alternatives for such a translation. One is using the definition of *Āglāc*, which would result in a translation of "miserable-woman" or similar; which could be appropriate as she just had her son brutally murdered. The second alternative derives from the "fierce opponent" definition, which would mean something like "fierce female fighter," or something along those lines. Neither of these translations give a physically "monstrous" definition or connotation. Hennequin suggests, rightly so, the monstrous translation here is the result of preconceived ideas of what Grendel's mother is, based on the translators' understandings of

²³ Christine Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1992): 4, 8.

²⁴ Compound words were frequently used in Old English, and the combination was straightforward so as to be easily understood.

²⁵ Clark Hall, "aglāc," *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Second Edition* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916): 14.

²⁶ Clark Hall, "aglāca," *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Second Edition* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916): 14.

²⁷ *Beowulf*, line 1259A. Also see Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster: the Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," *English Studies* 89, no. 5 (October 2008): 520.

Beowulf. Thus, from the introduction of Grendel's mother, the reader can infer that she is a noblewoman (or at least of noble character, as can be read from her following the tradition of blood-feud to avenge her son's murder) and that she is either a grief-stricken woman or a fierce woman. Indeed, it is reasonable to interpret her as both, based on the loss of her son and her exploits in the poem.

All the words used for Grendel's mother have been human, but there is one seeming deviation. Lines 1506-9 read:

Bær þa seo brimwylf, þa heo to botme com,
hringa þengel to hofe sinum,
swa he ne mihte, no he þæs modig wæs,
wæpna gewealdan...²⁸

Brimwylf is the compound of *brim* (sea) and *wylf* (wolf), which seems to be seawolf; however, given the context that Grendel's mother is dragging Beowulf by force to her hall, it could be a simple metaphor like a wolf dragging its prey to somewhere safe to eat, even if the prey is still struggling. For Grendel's mother to be able to do this indicates her physical strength, grappling ability, and her ability to move effectively in the water. The seawolf imagery could also be a reference to Vikings or other seaborne attack, much like the ocean is called the whale-road.²⁹ Given the strength and skill of Grendel's mother, such a literal or figurative connection to the Viking raiders would be poignant to describing her as a powerful woman.

The last description of Grendel's mother comes shortly after the *brimwylf* passage and reinforces her being a woman, as well as her power and connection to the water. In lines 1518-9:

²⁸ Then the angry sea-wolf swam to the bottom,/carried to her den the lord of those rings,/clutched him so hard he might not draw sword./-no matter how brave-...

²⁹ *Beowulf*, line 10, *hron-rade*.

Ongeat þa se goda grund-wyrgenne,
merewif mihtig;³⁰

Instead of the translation provided by Chickering in the footnote, a more literal translation would be something like, “then he saw the doughty, land-cursed one,/mighty lake-woman.” *Goda* seems a strange word in this passage because it comes back to either God, a god, or something good (although “doughty” is another possibility, which I have chosen for the above translation as it seemed to be the most accurate one; “good” doesn’t seem to go with cursed, but “doughty” does work with what Grendel’s mother has so far accomplished). *Grund* is another word with a variety of meanings, including: “the bottom of the earth or sea, the sea or water, land or country, an abyss, the surface of the earth,” etc.³¹ *Wyrgenne* is most closely related to *wyrg/wearg*, meaning cursed one, or outlaw. *Mihtig* means great or mighty. *Merewif* comes from *mere* (sea, lake, body of water, etc) and *wif*. This phrase emphasizes both the tragic loss of Grendel’s mother as well as her formidable abilities.

Most of the descriptions of Grendel’s mother comes in the narration, but King Hrothgar gives his description of Grendel and his mother to Beowulf the morning after her attack at Heorot. Hrothgar says:

1345 “Ic þæt lond-būend, lēode mīne,
Sele-rædende secgan hȳrde,
þæt hīe gesāwon swylce twēgen
micle mearc-stapan mōras healdan,
ellor-gæstas. Ðæra oððer wæs,
1350 þæs þe hīe gewislicost gewitan meahton,
Idese onlīcnæs; oððer earm-sceapen
On weres wæstum wræc-lāstas træd,

³⁰ Then he saw the witch of the sea-floor,/towering mere-wife.

³¹ Toller, T. Northcote, and Joseph Bosworth, “grund,” *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth: Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921): 488.

Næfne hē wæs mǣra þonne ænig man oðer;
 þone on geār-dagum Grendel nemdo[n]
 1355 fold-būende; no hīe fæder cunnon,
 hwæþer him ænig wæs ær ācenned
 dymra gāsta.³²

This passage gives us insight into where Grendel and his mother lived, their social status, and physical descriptions of both. They are called *micle mearc-stapan*, or great/mighty border-steppers who, *moras healdan*, ruled or held the moors. Being border-steppers is rather ambiguous beyond telling us they live away from the Danes at Heorot, but it does offer a possible reading of exiles. *Micle* means large, great, or many.

Two is hardly “many,” which leaves us with large (size) or great (repute), both of which may be viable. Later in the same passage, Grendel specifically is described as *mara þonne ænig man oðer*, “greater than any other man.” Attributing a noteworthy greatness to Grendel the *micle mearc-stapa* seems inappropriate when he is both a villain in the poem and already killed by Beowulf the hero, who quite easily and literally rips Grendel’s arm off. So *micle* in the sense of size is the most likely interpretation; however, the latter *mara þonne...* is only talking about Grendel, so whether Grendel’s mother is larger than normal is debatable, but Grendel’s superhuman size is less so.

Countering the attribution of size (or giving a double meaning to *micle*, which is theoretically and historically possible) is their description post-*micle mearc-stapan* as *moras healdan*, or ruling the moors. *Heald* is associated with ruling, occupying, guarding, or protecting. By using this word, the author seems to be indicating that Grendel and his mother are

³² “I have land-holders among my people,/counselors in hall, speak of it thus:/huge, vague borderers, walking the moors,/spirits from elsewhere; so far as any man/might clearly see, one of them walked/in the likeness of a woman; the other, misshapen,/stalked marshy wastes in the tracks of an exile,/except that he was larger than any other man...”

not just mere survivors, recluses or powerless exiles or refugees in the moors, but that they are strong enough to hold them, much like King Hrothgar holds Heorot. This can be seen in connection with the first description of Grendel's mother as *ides*, noblewoman, for if one has a hold and rules a land they can be considered noblemen and women.

From other early medieval English poems, such as *The Wanderer*, we know the idea of being an exile, refugee, or last of one's tribe was considered a misfortune; so not only has Grendel's mother lost her son but she has also become completely isolated. To imagine this would not cause grief is to presuppose that Grendel's mother was not a human, or creature, with emotions; yet from *ides āglæcwif* we can read her as a woman, so her grief is a reasonable thing. Further, one can include a characteristic of fierceness in a picture of Grendel's mother because of the bravery she is about to demonstrate in the poem: she is about to go, alone, to Heorot where King Hrothgar, Beowulf, and all the warriors are. She willingly places herself in a place where she will be vastly outnumbered by warriors, including the one who just killed her son. However, that is what shows her nobility and bravery, or fierceness: her loyalty to her son and the blood-feud tradition of avenging a tribal death. Since she wasn't a monster, that only increases her bravery, as we cannot assume she is relying on anything beyond the powers of a normal woman to defend herself.

There is even a passage in *Beowulf* that hints at this ability of a woman to be as deadly with a weapon as a man,³³ and the passage has caused a split among scholars as to how to interpret it:

³³ As in Headley's translation of the passage, *Beowulf*, 57: "The horror wasn't muted by the measure of women's strength against men's brawn. Both can hold slaying swords, glazed with gore, and score the boar-crests from war-helmets, warming them with blood."

1280B þā ðær sōna wearð
 edhwyrft eorlum, siþðan inne fealh
 Grendles mōdor. Wæs se gryre lāssa
 efne swā micle, swā bið mægþa cræft,
 wīg-gryre wīfes, be wæpned-men,
 1285 þonne heoru bunden, hamere gepuren,
 sweord swāte fāh swīn ofer helme,
 ecgum *dyhttig*, andweard scireð.³⁴

In particular are lines 1282B through 1284: “Terror was the less by just so much as the strength of women, attack of battle-wives, compared to armed men (Chickering).” Some scholars interpret this as meaning she was less of a threat, or at least perceived as such, to the Danes;³⁵ although some think this was a form of *litote*, or ironic understatement.³⁶ This ironic reading makes the most sense given both an acceptance of female fighters and, specific to Grendel’s mother, the great and immediate fear by all the Danes and Geats; Beowulf fights Grendel naked, but is fully armed and armored for Grendel’s mother after her attack. A plain reading is incongruent because if she is a monster, then she would be more terrifying; putting a *litote* reading more in line with those scholars who read her as a monster.

Another aspect of interest is the description of men and women in this passage. The author could have simply compared women to men, yet the author included words to describe both as being armed or fierce in battle, which Chickering and Headley point to in their translations. *Wæpned* describes the men as armed, and *wig* (strife, war, battle, etc) and *gryre* (horror, terror, fierceness, violence) give women a description of “battle-fierce.” Such

³⁴ And then to the nobles/came reversal of fortune, once Grendel’s mother/reached into the hall. Terror was the less/by just so much as the strength of women,/ attack of battle-wives, compared to armed men, when wrought sword, forged under hammer,/the iridescent blade, blood-wet, cuts/through enemy’s board-guard, an edge ever firm.

³⁵ Martin Puhvel, “The Might of Grendel’s Mother,” *Folklore* 80, no. 2 (summer 1969): 81-88.

³⁶ *litote* was a common form of speech in Old English, so it is an acceptable theory here.

descriptions could simply serve the poetic function of alliteration.³⁷ However, such an analogy serves also to tell us something about Grendel's mother: that she comes as a fierce and armed fighter. The analogy notes both men and women as armed and dangerous. All the warriors in Heorot were armed and accoutered, according to *Beowulf*. The implication is Grendel's mother fulfills the female aspect of the analogy as armed and capable in combat, otherwise the analogy doesn't make sense or seem appropriate.

The idea of female combatants may seem strange in a culture that is just now allowing women into all combat roles in the military; however, archaeology and, perhaps, mythology suggest that it was not such a strange thing for the early medieval English. *The Guardian* published an article recently³⁸ discussing two archaeological studies that each have a woman buried amongst various weapons. This is significant because it has previously been known that such burials were common for kings or great warriors, who would be buried with their weapons and worldly wealth. For women to be buried in the same way indicates women, at least some, were renowned as warriors in their own right. An early medieval English audience hearing *Beowulf* may have likely considered Grendel's mother assuming a warrior quest as normal, even expected given *comitatus*. Therefore, this analogy is setting up the audience for Grendel's mother fighting the Danes to avenge her son's death.

It is also possible to read Grendel's mother as the best fighter in *Beowulf*, due to her skill, Beowulf's fear and preparation, the necessity of God's help for Beowulf to win, and perhaps

³⁷ Alliteration was important for the Old English poet, like metric harmony, and both are generally present.

³⁸ Dayla Alberge, "Meet Erika the Red: Viking women were warriors too, say scientists," *The Guardian* 2 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/02/viking-woman-warrior-face-reconstruction-national-geographic-documentary>.

even dirty fighting on Beowulf's part. All of these have already been discussed, except for the last assertion. E. G. Stanley has suggested that Beowulf may have pulled Grendel's mother's hair in his fight with her.³⁹ Stanley argues that such a tactic would have been considered dishonorable and not considered "fair fighting." Not only does this put a dint in Beowulf's reputation as a noble warrior, it also highlights even further my argument that only by cheating, and God's divine intervention, was Beowulf able to win. Without these elements, in addition to the magical sword, it is clear that Beowulf would have died and Grendel's mother would have possibly ended the feud and earned the reputation as the best fighter in the world, male or female.

Descriptions of King Hrothgar, his wife Wealhtheow, and the hero Beowulf contextualize a human reading of Grendel's mother. She is described as a queen, but not like queen Wealhtheow; rather Grendel's mother is described in the same terms as King Hrothgar, ruler of the Danes. Like these characters, Grendel's mother seems to have a comparable, even equal, understanding and respect for the ideas of justice through blood-feud. She can also be compared to Beowulf in strength and skill: while he easily rips Grendel's arm off, his fight with Grendel's mother is very different and more dangerous. She can also be contrasted with Grendel and the dragon in a way that portrays her much more like a hero, or a noble character at the very least, than a villain.

King Hrothgar is portrayed in *Beowulf* as a great king, except for his inability to deal with Grendel. Oddly though, that one fault never seems to be used against him; Beowulf doesn't say Hrothgar is weak, but rather focuses on the evil of Grendel and boasts that he will kill Grendel.

³⁹ E. G. Stanley, "Did Beowulf Commit 'Feaxfeng' Against Grendel's Mother?" *Notes and Queries* 23, 1976: 339-40.

Hrothgar's great hall, Heorot, which is described at length early on and in luxurious detail, demonstrates that he is a good king within early Medieval English culture; his vast treasure and equal generosity further confirms his excellent leadership. Not only was Hrothgar rich enough to fund construction of Heorot, but even after he continued to get treasure to give to his tribe in generous fashion. Beowulf, in particular, receives many treasures, weapons, armor, and horses both upon killing Grendel and Grendel's mother. Hrothgar even says he will adopt Beowulf as a son and guardian to his own two sons by Wealhtheow. Hrothgar also has a collection of weapons; he is even able to give his nobles famous, named swords. The most famous of which is Hrunting, which Beowulf is given after killing Grendel, yet that sword (presumably one of the best made, as well as having a history of killing armored opponents) is not enough to pierce Grendel's mother. Another element which can illuminate King Hrothgar's good reign is the description that he reigned for 50 years before Grendel. Beowulf is also described later on as having been king for 50 years before the dragon appears.

Grendel's mother is described in almost exactly the same terms as Hrothgar.⁴⁰ It has been mentioned above that Grendel's mother is described as *moras healdan*, ruling the moors. The poem also says she ruled for fifty years, putting her on equal terms with future King Beowulf.⁴¹ The description of Grendel's mother's hall is limited but does describe it as a hall, as well as saying it has weapons, which is how Beowulf finds the giant's sword he uses to kill Grendel's mother. It is worth noting that it is only with this giant's sword that Beowulf is able to prevail;

⁴⁰ M. Wendy Hennequin, "Her Own Hall: Grendel's Mother as King," *Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 17 (2017): 13-26.

⁴¹ Hennequin, "Her Own Hall," 14.

Hrunting, the famous sword that never failed for Unferth,⁴² is useless against Grendel's mother and Beowulf quickly throws it aside to fight her with his bare hands, which also fails, and ends up with Grendel's mother mounting him and stabbing at him with her own blade.⁴³

According to Hennequin, a possible reason the *Beowulf* author sets up Grendel's mother as a type of monarch like Hrothgar is twofold: partly to make it more dramatic, and also to follow the trope of many early medieval English, Irish, and Old Norse tales where the hero must defeat a female opponent in order to finally be king.⁴⁴ The depiction of Beowulf's fight with Grendel is very one-sided. Hennequin suggests the poem's author wanted to keep suspense, which he does by not only the fight itself, but Beowulf's preparation for the fight. While he fought Grendel naked, in a sense, the poem makes a point of describing how Beowulf is armored and armed with Hrunting before he approaches Grendel's mother.⁴⁵

While Grendel's mother is compared with King Hrothgar, she is equally contrasted with Hrothgar's queen Wealhtheow. Wealhtheow is represented as the traditional peace-weaver. She was married to Hrothgar to foster peace; during social events she goes around serving drinks to the important people; she also makes speeches importing peace, cooperation, and loyalty to her two sons who will become kings one day, according to her hopes. In contrast, Grendel's mother

⁴² Although, given Beowulf's jabs at Unferth being a coward, perhaps Beowulf using that sword was not a good idea.

⁴³ Although this fails as the poem notes the armor and God's predetermination of the outcome of the battle save Beowulf, imagine the difference in this poem if Grendel's mother had won: would she still be seen as a villain and Beowulf as this epic hero?

⁴⁴ William Sayers, "Grendel's Mother, Icelandic Grýla and Irish Nechta Scéne: Eviscerating Fear," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16/17 (1996/1997): 256-268.

⁴⁵ Besides adding to the drama, what this approach does is really emphasize how much more worried Beowulf is about the fight. While nowadays we might wonder at being more worried about fighting a woman than another man (known for his killing ability), perhaps back then the idea of a woman being a combatant on equal terms with men was normal.

actively seeks revenge, much like the male warriors do; instead of merely mourning or passively suffering evil, as Wealhtheow is portrayed. While Wealhtheow serves peace drinks and makes peaceful talk, Grendel's mother is completely silent, and only offers Beowulf a fight for his life.⁴⁶

Whereas Beowulf's fight with Grendel was a completely one-sided battle, Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother is doubtful from before it even starts. Why the difference? She only killed one person, and Grendel killed dozens over twelve years, thirty in the first night, often in bloody fights between the two sides. James Paz suggested Beowulf only saw Grendel as another opponent, yet saw Grendel's mother as an Other's attack on their culture, rule of law, and feuding.⁴⁷ Renee Trilling had a similar reading of Grendel's mother.⁴⁸ Trilling posited Grendel's mother as an abjection of the early medieval English heroic, feudal, and masculine culture. Trilling argues it was not the job of a mother to seek revenge, even if Grendel's mother was the last member of her family. She suggests that a woman taking on the man's job of revenge was a threat to the masculine warrior culture, and is why the Danes and Beowulf pursued her the very next day (as opposed to waiting twelve years for Beowulf to kill Grendel), and why Beowulf leaves all traces of her behind, instead bringing back Grendel's head and the sword hilt Beowulf

⁴⁶ Such a complete inversion of the roles played by Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother could be seen as the Christian interpretations of the roles of women, more so than the early medieval English views, which included female goddesses and the Valkyrie. Wealhtheow, the good woman, is rescued and saved by the men, eventually, and Grendel's mother, the bad woman, receives the biblical punishment of the saying, "all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Which can also be extended to Beowulf, in a way, because he ends up killed in battle, he has no heirs, and his people end up destroyed and exiled.

⁴⁷ James Paz, "Æshere's Head, Grendel's Mother and the Sword That Isn't a Sword: Unreadable Things in Beowulf," *Exemplaria* 25, issue 3 (Fall 2013): 231-251.

⁴⁸ Renee R. Trilling, "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 24 (2007): 1-20.

used to kill Grendel's mother. She suggests this was a symbolic forgetting of the metaphorical challenge and threat she posed. Both these views help the idea that Grendel's mother was a woman because, if she was a monster, then it is not logical that she would have been treated as a different threat. Rather, they take her much more seriously because of her femininity and her humanity.

The last characters to illuminate her character are the two other villains and monsters in the poem: Grendel and the dragon. Grendel is portrayed as a bloodthirsty serial killer: there is no practical reason given for the catalyst of his killing spree.⁴⁹ Grendel is portrayed as little more than a big, monstrous killer without any real evidence of intelligence, beyond basic cognition and almost animal-like instincts. The dragon is an even clearer representation because it is quite literally a dragon. However, Signe M. Carlson suggested everything could be reduced to exaggerated storytelling of real events, and that the dragon was a large lizard, hers seems to be an isolated claim that did not create a lasting impact on the scholarly conversation.⁵⁰ Susan Morrison expands on Carlson's idea by rewriting *Beowulf* as a historical novel, wherein everything is factually possible.⁵¹

Thus, of the three villains, the dragon is a physical monster, and Grendel is a moral

⁴⁹ Around line 90 of *Beowulf* it is written that the noise of laughter, feasting, and the Genesis account of creation in the newly built Heorot is what causes Grendel's rage, but how accurately does this Christian account of his anger represent the pre-Christian, original tellings of *Beowulf*?

⁵⁰ Signe M. Carlson, "The Monsters of Beowulf. Creations of Literary Scholars," *The Journal of American Folklore* 80 (1967): 357-364. Although I give Carlson's view a slightly negative light in this article, such is only due to following what can almost be called a universal interpretation of the dragon, as opposed to the more divided and debated subject of Grendel's mother; the reality is I favor Carlson's idea that in every story can be found a true story or moral truth; however, such a critique of *Beowulf* in its entirety or in regards to the dragon is beyond the scope of this work.

⁵¹ Susan Signe Morrison, *Grendel's Mother: the Saga of the Wyrd-Wife*, Washington: Top Hat Books (2015).

monster. Yet the third, Grendel's mother, is very different. She is described in much more human terms. She is mentally associated with love of her son and her understanding and respecting of the blood-feud. Such a human concept is a powerful indicator for the humanity of Grendel's mother, not simply because a mother seeks to avenge her son, but in the very vengeful and intelligent way she does so: she exacts a limited yet significant blood price. She kills a dear counselor to King Hrothgar (following the *quid pro quo* of blood-feud) rather than going on an indiscriminate killing spree like Grendel or the dragon. Such intelligence, social knowledge, and discernment are indicative of more than just her cunning.

Her lone killing is indicative of both her strict adherence to the blood-feud idea of a life for a life, as well as her bravery and competence in her attack; and of her emotional restraint at not killing more people in revenge of her son. If she were as monstrous as her son, why didn't she kill even more? After all, how many did Grendel kill simply because the Danes were too loud and talked about God? If such a monster could kill dozens over a dozen years, surely the death of Grendel would warrant far more bloodshed from the equally monstrous mother, who would be just as bloodthirsty but also even more motivated by grief and the desire for revenge. Her extreme restraint seems to be evidence for her moral and intellectual superiority to Grendel.

Grendel's mother was not merely a woman, but an *ides*, or noblewoman, and arguably the best fighter in the world. For Beowulf, she is a necessary step in becoming king and finishing his quest. For the narrative, this reading of her perhaps best emphasizes the idea that *Beowulf* was a Christian critique of pagan cultural ideas of warriors, honor, and justice. But for Grendel's mother herself, it sets her free from the stereotype of a monster or witch who is evil at heart and without sympathy; instead, she is worthy not only of sympathy and compassion, but also of great

admiration for her courage, honor, strength and skill.

Chapter 3: Beyond Sainthood: Judith the Noble Warrior

In the Christian poem *Judith*, the hero's actions and descriptions present her as noble as well as saintly. The active role of Judith in war and politics was similar to reality and not just allowed by the narrator because Judith was some sort of proto-Christian saint. *Judith* is an Old Testament apocryphal book, but its selection as the subject of monk-poets is significant, as there are many other books that could have been chosen for being more in line with Christian doctrine; yet *Judith* may have been chosen because it was less Christian and more similar to what was seen in the early medieval English culture. Judith acts in ways that are clever and brave, and she is compensated for it in a very early medieval English way, rather than by Christian martyrdom or veneration. Rather than being the pristine example of Christ's bride on Earth, Judith reflects the religious, cultural and political ideals for an early medieval English woman or character.

While *Beowulf* is a pre-Christian or pagan tale (with its Christian overtones), the story of Judith is firmly situated inside of Christian literature; and while *Beowulf* may be seen as a critique of the culture, *Judith* is very much hagiographic, and an attempt, perhaps, to situate the story and character in the English culture, with Judith taking on the appearance of a noblewoman, even Valkyrie. *Judith* represents a complex combination of an epic hero quest, literary adaptation, translation, and religious hagiography. The full poem is lost, due to damage, but the last 400 lines that remain in the Vitellius Manuscript portray her as a Valkyrie of God: in her beauty and seduction of Holofernes, as well as her role in targeting and killing Holofernes. The poet paints a clear picture of evil (Holofernes and his army) vs good (Judith and the Jews of Bethulia) and places Judith the heroine, killer, and noblewoman/politician in a very positive light. Her status as a staunch follower of God is important and overt, but with close-reading

analysis Judith stands out as violent, beautiful, noble, and powerful in ways that reflect the culture of the early Medieval English audience.

As Christine Fell observes, women in early medieval English literature and culture fill a complex role, made ambiguous by translation of language and culture, especially scholars' conscious or subconscious impositions of what they imagine gender-roles for women were like.⁵² She readily synthesizes scholarship and evidence supporting a more grammatically-gendered language, rather than a socially-gendered culture, in the sense that women often had equal (or greater) hereditary, legal, political, religious, and martial power with men. While an initial reading of *Judith* may emphasize her saintliness or religious standing, a closer look at behavior and an analysis of word counts of adjectives and nouns suggests a more secular and noble representation.

Judith is described using a variety of positive words. The main words are *mægð*⁵³ (eleven times), *ides*⁵⁴ (six times), *gleaw*⁵⁵ (five times), *halige*⁵⁶ (three times), *beorhtan*⁵⁷ (three times),

⁵² Christine E. Fell, "Words and Women in Anglo-Saxon England," *Lastworda betst: 'Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell with Her Unpublished Writings*, ed. by Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe, (Donington, UK: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 198-215.

⁵³ Richard Trask, *Beowulf and Judith: Two Heroes*, Maryland: University Press of America (1977): Lines 35-37, 43, 77, 125, 135, 144-6, 165, 254, 260, 323-5, and 333-4. All citations of *Judith* are from this translation.

⁵⁴ Lines 14, 55, 59, 108-9, 144-6, and 340.

⁵⁵ Lines 13, 41, 148, 171, and 333-4.

⁵⁶ Lines 56, 160, and 260

⁵⁷ Lines 59, 254, and 340.

*snoteran*⁵⁸ (two times), *æðele*⁵⁹ (two times), *wundenlocc*⁶⁰ (two times), *ellenrof*⁶¹ (two times), *wif*,⁶² *ælfscinu*,⁶³ *hringum*,⁶⁴ *et al.* The most mentioned characteristic of Judith is not her holiness, but rather it is her intellect that is chief. *Snotere/an* and *gleaw* are mentioned seven times, whereas *halige* is only used three times. Judith is praised more for her intelligence than her holiness. This is striking because, while wisdom is a virtue in Christianity, it is rarely a primary virtue; the books of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* are the two exceptions (out of sixty-four books).⁶⁵ Generally, the emphasis has often been on persistent faith and adherence to core beliefs and practices, like pacifism (before the romanization by Constantine and the Catholic foundation), faith, works, and love.⁶⁶ So for intellect to be the most mentioned virtue of Judith indicates the influence of the concept of nobility from the early medieval English culture. The Valkyrie traditions of Valkyries acting as wise guardians or mentors to heroes may be an influence in early Medieval English literature⁶⁷ and it plays a role in Judith, as well.

⁵⁸ Lines 55 and 125.

⁵⁹ Lines 176 and 256.

⁶⁰ Lines 77 and 103.

⁶¹ Lines 108-9 and 144-6.

⁶² Line 148.

⁶³ Line 14.

⁶⁴ Line 35-7.

⁶⁵ Matthew 22:36-39, 1 Corinthians 13:4-14, Galatians 5:22-23, Colossians 3:12, Titus 2:2, Hebrews 11:16, James 1:5, James 3:13, and 1 John 4:8. The two passages from James are the only that highlight wisdom: James 1:5 simply says if one does not have wisdom, to ask God for it, and in James 3:13, someone who is wise must show it by good works, tying wisdom to action.

⁶⁶ Even in the case of the excellent wife (Proverbs 31:10-31), she is wise, but the emphasis is on her devotion, care, and hard work, and her wisdom seems to be more a means to an end, rather than a virtue by itself.

⁶⁷ Helen Damico, "Beowulf's" *Wealththeow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1984, 39.

While intellect may not be a virtue for a simple nun, farmer or fisher, it would be important for an abbess, *eorl*, estate-owner, *ides*, or queen in the management of their respective areas, of which Fell provides a compelling overview of many instances where women held such positions.⁶⁸ While the manuscript does not let us read the beginning of *Judith* in order to know whose idea it was to send Judith to Holofernes, it likely followed the biblical narrative, in which Judith herself decides what to do. Besides paralleling the source text, the idea is supported by Judith's description as clever. It would take a clever and brave (*ellenrof*⁶⁹ is used twice to describe Judith) person to devise such a plan and execute it. No other character is described in such a way as to suggest it was someone other than Judith. Further, her similarities to a noblewoman support it as well. It is noteworthy that there is no mention of a king, lord, or any other named political figure in Bethulia, other than Judith. In particular, the poetic absence of Achior (Ammonite general exiled from Holofernes and ends up in Bethulia) from the prose places even more attention on Judith herself.

A good ruler or chief would be expected to make a plan and, in the early medieval English culture, to be personally involved, much like a lord leading his warriors in a battle. With archaeological evidence of renowned female warriors,⁷⁰ it is not unreasonable to see some of these characteristics and expectations placed on Judith, a noblewoman of Bethulia. She not only makes a bold plan, as only a woman capable of seducing the general Holofernes could, but then

⁶⁸ Christine E Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, London: British Museum Publications, 1984.

⁶⁹ Courageous or powerful, "ellenrof," J. R.. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960, 103.

⁷⁰ Dayla Alberge, "Meet Erika the Red: Viking Women Were Warriors Too, Say Scientists," *The Guardian*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/02/viking-woman-warrior-face-reconstruction-national-geographic-documentary>.

she takes the risk upon herself to execute it. The poem does not indicate Judith is part of the attack she later orders the Jews to conduct, but, in a sense, she has already led the charge by her entry into the camp and killing Holofernes.

Although cleverness is Judith's most commonly named character trait, she is mostly referenced to as *mægð* and *ides*: eleven times as *mægð* and six times as *ides*. Trask sticks to translations such as maiden, maid, and lady. His caution in not calling Judith a virgin is supported by Hugh Magennis' scholarship that "there is some influence from hagiography apparent in the treatment of Judith but she is essentially a Germanic noblewoman rather than a Christian virgin martyr."⁷¹ While Magennis is correct in emphasizing Judith's lack of martyrdom or virginity in the text, he argues for Judith as a reluctant hero who is unsuited to the task because she is a woman, and therefore this should magnify her religious faith. However, it is because Judith resembles a Germanic noblewoman that she is particularly suited to the narrator's adaptation of the Vulgate *Judith*. Magennis is correct in highlighting the parallel between Judith and Beowulf's killing of Grendel's mother in the way they both go into the enemy's lair alone to kill them. Yet he argues her prayer to God before she kills Holofernes is a sign of female weakness, rather than a Christian prayer mimicking a secular, heroic boast.

Another lens for reading Judith is through the early Medieval English idea of the blood-feud. Holofernes is attacking the city and has killed many of Judith's people, for whom the noblewoman could feel responsible, thus giving the Jews a reason to feud. Judith takes up the feud and exacts her payment from Holofernes with his life; in a similar way to Grendel's mother

⁷¹ Hugh Magennis, "Gender and Heroism in the Old English *Judith*," *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002, 5-18. Quote on page 10.

taking her revenge on King Hrothgar by killing his advisor Æshere. Much like Beowulf taking the head of Grendel and the giant's sword hilt he used to kill Grendel's mother, Judith decapitates Holofernes and receives his arms and armor as reward after the final battle. Certainly the idea of revenge and blood-payment falls more in line with the Old Testament idea of *talionis*⁷² justice and the early medieval English culture than a New Testament, Christian worldview that emphasizes love and forgiveness.

Judith also makes a type of boast when she is going to kill Holofernes, as she prays to God.⁷³ She asks for victory as she asks forgiveness for the murder she is about to commit, *Forgif me, swegles Ealdor, sigor and soðne geleafan þæt ic mid þis sweorde mote geheawan þysne morðres bryttan*.⁷⁴ Trask translates it as “give to me triumph and sincere faith.” *Forgif* is the singular imperative of *forgiefan*,⁷⁵ but it is also etymologically close to *forgietan*.⁷⁶ *Forietan* is also closer to the Lord's prayer, “forgive me my sins,” and this prayer of Judith's plays on both words and their definitions. She is both asking for success as well as forgiveness for the sin she is about to commit, in order to protect her people and satisfy the blood-feud. This prayer and boast is more Christian in its form and attitude, but the emphasis on the bloody task is as strong as Beowulf's boast to kill Grendel.⁷⁷

⁷² Eye for an eye.

⁷³ Lines 83-94.

⁷⁴ Lines 88-90.

⁷⁵ “to grant or allow,” “forgiefan,” J. R.. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 4th edition*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960, 128.

⁷⁶ “To forget,” “forgietan,” J. R.. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 4th edition*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960, 128.

⁷⁷ *Beowulf*. Trans. Howell D. Chickering, Jr. (New York, Anchor Books, 2006) Lines 407-455.

A martial and political action of Judith is her orders to attack the Assyrians, not merely to exact more revenge, but also to have “*tir æt tohtan*,” glory in war, part of which includes more booty than anyone could tell.⁷⁸ In the Bible, Judith also exhorts an attack, but only to defeat the enemy, and she does not mention the lure of booty.⁷⁹ The narrator notes that it took a month to gather all the treasure and bring it all into Bethulia. When Judith is given her portion of the treasure, the narrator says she acknowledges both God’s glory and her worthiness of the reward. Such a proud justification of one’s own action and worthiness is hardly saintly, but more in line with the lord or lady of a hall accepting their due, as well as the resulting dispersal of treasure in the form of gifts.

Judith may have had a direct part in the resulting attack on the Assyrians and the battle’s aftermath. The poem does not say that Judith was part of the attack, but the next mention of Judith after she is encouraging an attack is in the aftermath, as she is administering the collection of treasure:

þa seo cneoris eall,
mægða mærost, anes monðes fyrst,
wlanc wundenlocc, wægon on læddon
to ðære beorhtan byrig Bethuliam...⁸⁰

Judith’s proximity to the battle, its aftermath, and its treasure would be odd if only using a lens of Judith as solely a saint, but as a noblewoman it makes more sense. She planned and ordered the attack. She supervised the month-long aftermath of gathering treasure and bringing it back to the

⁷⁸ Lines 323-330.

⁷⁹ “Judith.” *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*. Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judith%2016&version=NRSVCE>. Chapter 14:1-5.

⁸⁰ Lines 323B-326.

city. Not to the temple, not to a memorial to God's glory in granting their victory, but to the city as a whole. It is quite possible Judith never left the story. Guy Bourquin suggests Judith only serves to instigate the Jewish warriors' courage,⁸¹ but given her acknowledged bravery to face danger and her connection to the attack, she may well have been a part of it. The arms and armor she is given as a reward may have been more than merely symbolic or decorative. There is no direct evidence of her participation in the final attack, but the circumstantial evidence in the narrative and archaeology is certainly provocative.

This focus on secular aspects of Judith is also consistent with the Valkyrie traditions of the Norse. Helen Damico has done much work in comparing early medieval English female characters to the Valkyrie traditions. Using the lens of the Valkyrie tradition further complicates a reading of Judith as a saintly, Christian figure because we can trace her roots to not only the Anglo-Saxon, Christian culture but also the non-Christian Norse history/mythology. Just as the existence of the early medieval English *wælcyrge* and its definition⁸² that both match the Nordic *Valkyrja* establishes a philological connection between the two, similarities can be drawn between Judith and the Valkyrie stories.

In order to support this secular view of Judith and her literary connection to the Valkyries, it will be helpful to briefly summarize Damico's work, which focused on *Beowulf* and Queen Wealhtheow. In "*Beowulf's*" *Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, Damico draws clear comparisons between the plot and characters of *Beowulf*, and the Valkyrie traditions of the Old

⁸¹ Guy Bourquin, "The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry," *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature; Presented to André Crépin*, ed. Leo Carruthers, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994, 1-18.

⁸² "chooser of the slain," "wælcyrge," J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 4th edition*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960, 393. The entry also includes witch and sorceress as possible translations.

Norse and Icelandic literature. Her focus is centered on Queen Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*, and successfully argues for a literary connection to the Valkyrie tradition, and Queen Yrsa, in particular, from *Hrolfs saga kraka*. She discusses two main types, or categories, of Valkyries: the earlier Valkyrie-brides are supernatural women who are emissaries of Odin and choosers of the dead. Yet at the same time these godly creatures are also attractive and passionate women who often become involved with heroic or villainous characters; acting as instigators to actions, as well as lovers or objects of quarrels. In this role they also act as protectors or advisors to the hero, often being key parts of the plot.

The second, and later, type of Valkyrie is someone more closely relegated to the hall (and not the battlefield), either of Odin in Valhalla, or on this earth, and they are presented as the peace-weaver, often offering drink and treasure to those in the hall. Yet these Valkyries still have their own volition and desires. It is in this category that Damico presents parallels between Queen Wealhtheow and Queen Yrsa. Damico also draws many parallels between the Valkyrie-brides and other early medieval English heroines, such as Judith, Juliana, and Elene. With a strong Norse population in the Dane Law, as well as the trading and raiding in England and Northern Europe, it is not surprising to see indications of shared stories and cultural adaptations.

Damico's work that is most relevant to *Judith* is her analysis of the Valkyrie as Odin's choosers of the dead, their status as wise guardians, and their physical characteristics. Judith is described as the *þeodnes mægð*⁸³ in several instances, much as the Valkyries were the servants of Odin. Damico notes "they serve as intermediaries between men and the deity, and their primary requisite for the office is 'wisdom,' for they function as advisers, guides, and arrangers of

⁸³ Line 165.

destinies. The *Valkyrjur* ‘choosers of the slain’ are of this class.’⁸⁴ Likewise, Judith is the literal chooser of the slain, if not also the theoretical chooser. The extant text does not specifically say Judith developed the plan to kill Holofernes, but she does indicate such.⁸⁵ Regardless, it is Judith who goes to Holofernes and cuts off his head. The next aspect Damico noted was the Valkyrie connection to wisdom. Here again, it is significant that, of all the words to describe Judith, it is her cleverness that is mentioned more than twice as much as her holiness or any other characteristic. Another characteristic is a desire for self-fulfillment that Damico associates with the Valkyries,⁸⁶ and it can be clearly seen in Judith’s Christianized desire to fulfill God’s will and her later reward.

Lastly, Damico notes that Valkyries are characteristically described as bright figures, much like other Christian figures and saints. Judith is called *beorhtan* three times, as many times as holy. *Ellenrof* also is in line with a Valkyrie or heroic figure or noble, but the specific connection is not as strong as *beorhtan*. Richard Schrade looks at *ælfscinu* and connects it to Judith’s physical beauty, in a similar way to the brightness. He also notes such bright or beautiful descriptions do not accompany the more recognized early medieval English lady Queen Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*.⁸⁷ Damico emphasizes “all valkyrie-brides have erotic desire as a dominant trait,”⁸⁸ and this can be clearly seen when Holofernes tells his soldiers to bring Judith

⁸⁴ Helen Damico, “Beowulf’s” *Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison WI, 1984, 38.

⁸⁵ See the passage at lines 177-198 where Judith says she killed Holofernes and says “as God almighty has manifested to you through my handiwork” at the end.

⁸⁶ Damico, *Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie*, 49.

⁸⁷ Richard Schrade. *God’s Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983, 24.

⁸⁸ Damico, *Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie*, 48.

to his bed. When the narrator described Judith as ring-adorned, *wundenlocc*, or *æðele* the picture remains more similar to the imagined Valkyrie or real-life noblewoman, queen, or warrior than a nun or saint.⁸⁹

These strong links between the poetic Judith and the Valkyrie tradition suggest either an attempt to make a Christian saint more discernible to the pagan, or the scribe copied down how the English had already taken Judith and mixed her with their culture and their ideas of the Valkyrie. Regardless, it shows that the perception of Judith as a saint or woman of God includes with it a very strong character that is actively smart, pretty, and powerful; all of this *because* she is a woman, and not despite.

The ambiguity surrounding the exact meanings of *mægð* and *ides* make concrete denial or assertion of virginity and nobility debatable at best, but presumptions can still be reasonably made. We can reasonably assume that Judith was youngish and of the nobility, given the descriptions of her beauty, her selection by Holofernes, and the role she plays in Bethulia. *Ides* is an interesting word because it is the one word that is used to describe both Judith and Grendel's mother. This is significant because while Judith is a proto-Christian heroine in the text, Grendel's mother is generally seen as a villain, with varying levels of humanity/monstrosity depending on the scholar's interpretation. The use of *ides* for both Judith and Grendel's mother suggests that the violent actions of both do not detract from their nobility, even when Grendel's mother seems to be on the wrong side of the narrative.

It is because Judith is an intelligent, brave, and pious woman in both a religious and cultural sense that her poem is the companion to *Beowulf* in the *Cotton Vitellius A15* manuscript.

⁸⁹ Although brightness, by itself, is certainly part of the hagiographic and artistic traditions.

One poem has Beowulf, a pagan, warrior-king as a hero and the other is a Christian heroine. Both are uplifted for praise and put in each other's heroic company. Judith is perhaps the most robust example of the many ways the early medieval English culture accepted a variety of violent and powerful roles for women. While Grendel's mother is an antagonist who acts alone and Judith is a protagonist who, after beheading Holofernes, leads an army, both women are described with a similar vocabulary, and they reveal the extent to which different forms of women's active roles in conflicts are acknowledged by early medieval English poets.

Chapter 4: Lynet, Called Savage by Some Men

As the Medieval period ended and transitioned to the early modern, the types of roles women could assume in literature had changed greatly. The roles, powers and motivations of heroines or female characters are notably more limited. Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* sits on the border between the Medieval and the early modern. Lynet "the Savyage," in his "Sir Gareth," shows some ways in which female characters exercise agency, both directly and indirectly, in a world dominated by kings, churchmen, knights and family. Like Nynyve in Amy Kaufman's analysis,⁹⁰ Lynet has significant agency, power, and intelligence in ways that are different from some of the romance tropes and cultural values of knighthood. According to Kaufman, Nynyve acts as a mentor or guide for King Arthur's court; Lynet fills much the same role for Sir Gareth. This aspect is reminiscent of the earlier Valkyrie tradition of women being mentors or guides to the hero. She acts in ways to benefit from the knighthood culture, especially the Oath of knighthood for King Arthur's knights of the Table Round, and she uses these benefits for her own ends. Her actions can be seen as a bold and valiant attempt to rescue her family despite a terrible enemy and a long period of suffering and defeat. She can even be examined as a precursor to the virtuous sister of Perceval later on in Malory, who, as Joanna Benskin has shown, is herself seen as a symbol of Christian virtue and Jesus Himself.⁹¹ Despite Elizabeth Edwards's claim that women in the grail quest "exist only as part of the theological

⁹⁰ Amy S. Kaufman, "The Law of the Lake: Malory's Sovereign Lady," *Arthuriana* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 56-73.

⁹¹ Joanna Benskin, "Perceval's Sister as Spiritual Authority and Eucharistic Symbol in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 117, Issue 3 (July 2018): 360-390.

signifying system, which for the most part assimilates the female with the diabolical,”⁹²

Benskin’s emphasis on the valorization of Perceval’s sister, is a useful and positive parallel for Lynet.

Heroes often have epithets reflecting their strengths, and Lynet as a heroine has one, as well. Lynet’s epithet of “the Damesell Savyage” is only revealed to the reader toward the very end of the story of “Sir Gareth,” at the end of the violent, knightly adventures when Sir Gareth and Sir Gawayne are fighting, and Lynet steps in to separate them by revealing they are brothers.⁹³ Such a wild epithet is juxtaposed not only by the fight of the two brothers, but also in the narrative at the end of fighting in general, after which the narrative quickly wraps up “Sir Gareth” with feasting and marrying. Such a late revelation is indicative of what Bonnie Wheeler calls Malory’s “habit of retroflective narration which constantly urges the audience to think backwards on the meaning of the hero’s previous adventure,”⁹⁴ and this is key to fully understanding Lynet and her story. In the Middle English Dictionary, “savage” can mean “wild, barbarous, uncivilized, rude, fierce, bold, valiant, cruel.”⁹⁵ This is a wide range of descriptors, and we can use these different definitions as lenses through which to illuminate Lynet’s character

⁹² Elizabeth Edwards, “The Place of Women in the Morte Darthur,” *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G Edwards, (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 43. As quoted in Benskin, “Perceval’s Sister,” page 363.

⁹³ Sir Thomas Malory, “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney,” *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd, Norton Critical Editions, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 222.36-47.

⁹⁴ Bonnie Wheeler, “‘The Prowess of Hands’: The Psychology of Alchemy in Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Gareth,’” in *Culture and the King, the Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend: Essays in honor of Valerie M. Lagorio*, eds. Martin B. Schichtman and James P. Carley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 183. As quoted in Karen Cherewatuk, “Pledging Troth in Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Gareth,’” *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory’s Morte Darthur*, *Arthurian Studies* LXVII, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 21.

⁹⁵ “Savāge,” Middle English Dictionary, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001). Online edition in Middle English Compendium, ed. Frances McSparran, et al., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018).

and her actions, although the story suggests that Lynet's epithet should be read in light of boldness, being valiant, and some amount of wildness since she does spend most of the story out on her adventures. In this sense, "savage" Lynet acted valiantly by interposing herself among the combatants, presumably due to her concern for Sir Gareth, her companion, champion, rescuer, and soon-to-be brother-in-law. In doing so, she is emphasizing the importance of familial peace and cooperation rather than knightly values or competition/violence.

Such an emphasis on peace begs a re-evaluation of her earlier actions in the story, when she uses a knight to prevent Sir Gareth and her sister, Lyness, from sleeping together, and resurrecting the knight both times after Sir Gareth decapitates the knight. Lynet quite openly and calmly performs these actions in front of everyone, and when Sir Gareth confronts her, saying "A, well, damesell, I wente ye wolde nat have done as ye have done," to which Lynet replies "My Lorde Sir Gareth, all that I have done I woll avowe hit-and all shall be for your worshyp and us all."⁹⁶ Whereas the knights generally use *worshyp* in the sense of glory on the battlefield and combat, here Lynet may be referring to the spiritual worship of sexual purity before marriage.

Lynet's actions and motivations in this scene may be supportive of the "savage" epithet: as valiantly defending what she believes in or the family she cares about, or in the unchristian, barbarous way she uses necromancy and a knight to complete her actions. Lynet may want to protect her sister, Lyness, from consummating her relationship with Sir Gareth before they have completed the marriage ceremony. This would protect Lyness' honor and help ensure Sir Gareth wouldn't end up just sleeping with Lyness or having her as only a paramour, which King Arthur

⁹⁶ Malory, "Sir Gareth," 207.37-40.

later alludes to as a viable option for Sir Gareth. Karen Cherevatuk spends a chapter in her book discussing how an audience contemporary of Malory would have seen the social and religious issues in “Sir Gareth,” noting how Lynet’s actions, sans magic, would have made sense in this regard.⁹⁷ This reading is also supported by Lynet saying it is for the worship of all, not just Sir Gareth.

It is odd that such a potentially violent epithet is given to a non-violent and unarmed woman in *Morte Darthur*. She is isn’t called “the virtuous,” “the fair,” or “the pure,” in line with the focus on beauty and purity that generally accompany the female characters in the story. The epithet of “savage” seems more in line with a villainous or adventurous knight than a damsel trying to save her sister by recruiting a knight. One might wonder why, instead of Lynet receiving the epithet, it was not a character like the Red Knight of the Red Lands. Besides giving this character more differentiation from the Red Knight (not of the Red Lands) with whom Sir Gareth fought earlier in the story, it would fit with his cruel treatment of the forty knights that have fought with him before Lyness’ castle: not granting them mercy, killing them, and then putting their corpses all on display by hanging them. So why did Lynet get the epithet, and not this knight?

The answer may be more than her bravery in simply adventuring out into the wild to save her family. It may have to do with Lynet’s connection, albeit unwanted, with the murder of the forty knights by the Red Knight of the Red Lands. While most everyone in Lyness’ castle would have likely witnessed the battles of the knights with the Red Knight of the Red Lands, in the narrative we find Lynet outside the castle looking for a knight to relieve the siege. It is quite

⁹⁷ Karen Cherevatuk, “Pledging Troth in Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Gareth,’” *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory’s Morte Darthur*, *Arthurian Studies* LXVII, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 1-23.

possible that Lynet's entreaty in King Arthur's court was not the first time Lynet asked for help. Sir Gareth may have been the forty-first knight that Lynet brought to the castle. Lynet may not have done any violence with her own hands, but it would only be because she brought a knight to the castle that the Red Knight of the Red Lands would be able to execute his cruel custom. After the first time Lynet saw this happen, whether as an innocent spectator from the castle, or as the unwitting accomplice that brought the unlucky knight there in the first place, every other time a knight came or was brought there, Lynet and everyone there would have had an ever-increasing assurance of what would befall any knight that did not defeat the Red Knight of the Red Lands. Lynet was, in this way, the catalyst for many, if not all, of the knights' demise. However, an analysis of Lynet may not suggest accepting a "cruel" definition of "savage." Every time it happened, Lynet was more closely connected to death, and potentially closer to the loss of her own family. Yet Lynet participates in this cruel custom out of a sense of desperation on her part to save her family and land. For the time it would take to find and escort forty knights to the castle, one can imagine a time period of at least several months.

That it may have taken a long time for Lynet to go through forty knights is significant because it creates a greater weight of fear and perhaps guilt for Lynet; the longer she is trying to save her family, the more she will be afraid. Assuming she sought the help from nearby knights, perhaps under fealty to Lyness (or simply familial concern), the more that died would have meant the further she would have to go to get help, not only because of lack of live knights nearby, but as more knights are mercilessly hung, the more the stories would spread and the less likely for a knight errant to take on the adventure if the knight knows he will not be granted mercy should he lose the fight.

This extended timeframe has several consequences. Every day that goes by is another chance for the castle to be overcome by force, trickery, or starvation and the potential loss of life, freedom, and honor (sexual and knightly) of Lynet's family. For a caring family member, this would be a terrible weight on the mind. Especially as Lynet is the only one who is able to seek rescue. If the castle falls while she is gone, she could very well feel survivor's guilt and a despair imagining that it was her fault she did not get help soon enough to save her family. So every day she is gone this would be weighing on her mind, both the thought that it could happen and the fear that it has already happened and news has not reached her yet. As if such mental anguish was not enough, if Lynet had human compassion for others, such as any knight she could find to help rescue her family, she would have fear and anxiety for the fate of that knight, as well. Carl Grey Martin points out the valor of the knight as a means of celebrating virtue,⁹⁸ as an armed and armored warrior. But a woman like Lynet, unarmed and unprotected, shows much more valor and bravery in her adventuring, especially when adding that her adventure is out of desire for family and not mere worship, like many of the knights.

This is a plausible reason for part of why Lynet is so hostile toward Sir Gareth when he initially takes on her cause. Not only is she worried that this kitchenboy-turned-knight will not save her family, she could also feel a helpless sense of fear for his fate, which she would deem to be inevitable, given that Sir Gareth is only known to her as a kitchen knave, and the Red Knight of the Red Lands is an experienced knight who has already won against 40 knights in one siege alone, excluding any other battles, sieges, and tournaments he would have participated in prior to

⁹⁸ Carl Grey Martin, "Feats and Feasts: The Valorization of Sir Gareth of Orkney's 'Grete Laboure,'" *Studies in Philology* 113, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 231-253.

the current siege of Lynet's family. This is perhaps why Malory ensured that in the narrative, Lynet is made aware of Sir Gareth being a kitchen knave.

Without this as a justification for her "savage" treatment of Sir Gareth, it would be difficult to imagine a plausible reason for Lynet to so savagely berate the person she has asked to risk his life for her sake. Such would be the case if Sir Gareth had already been "Sir" Gareth to King Arthur's court; he would have been a knight that Lynet would be anxious to please, rather than denigrate, in order to ensure Sir Gareth would follow through with his promise to attempt a rescue of Lyness and her castle. Yet Lynet knows that Sir Gareth is a kitchen-knave, so another reason she might berate him could be her desire to replace him with a famous knight, like Sir Lancelot or Sir Gawain. When they encounter knights on the road and Lynet tries to separate herself from Sir Gareth, it could serve to protect Sir Gareth, if he flees, or replace him with a better knight, if he is beaten.

Given Lynet's perception of Sir Gareth's training, she has reason to drive him away from her. Not only so she can continue her search for a suitable knight, and not only to save his life, but also to protect her own life and liberty. As Catherine Batt notes, a damsel by herself ought to be helped by any knight of the Round Table that encounters her, but if that knight first finds her with another knight and the first knight wins a fight against the damsel's escort, that knight has claim to the damsel as his prize.⁹⁹ So as long as Sir Gareth is with Lynet, she would feel herself at the mercy of any knight that would come by. This would change her position of power dramatically because, while alone, she can essentially demand a knight to help her. However, if she were won by a knight, then she would be at the mercy of the knight in almost every respect,

⁹⁹ Catherine Batt, "Malory and Rape," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 78-99.

from her chastity to her ability to save her family. Therefore, it was imperative that she get rid of what she thought was someone who would almost certainly ruin her chances of success.

Lynet's attempts to maintain power occur inside the castle, as well as outside, as she attempts to act in a familial role. As Hodges¹⁰⁰ and Cherewatuk discuss Lynet's interdiction of Sir Gareth and Lyones' tryst as an act of ensuring performative or social norms and customs of marriage, there is also the particularly extreme way Lynet does so. Instead of multiple knights without necromancy or some other more practical tactic, Malory instead gives Lynet sorcery to use a zombie knight to violently attack Sir Gareth, rather than simply place guards or some other more peaceful yet public way of ensuring Sir Gareth and Lyness cannot consummate their relationship. While *Le Morte Darthur* features magic as a normal part of the world, these two instances of Lynet's zombie knight are the only occasions that she is noted to use such powers. The only other instance of magic in her family is the magic ring that Lyness gives to Sir Gareth during the tournament, although there is no indication that Lynet had anything to do with this ring.¹⁰¹ The use of zombies also adds more dramatic flair and helps counter Elizabeth Archibald's idea that "it is hard to tell stories about happily married knights because the notion of impressing/winning the lady is no longer effective."¹⁰²

Another important element of Lynet as a character with agency is her ability to show mercy. The vengeful backstory of the Red Knight of the Red Lands provides a contrast to her

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2005).

¹⁰¹ Malory, "Sir Gareth," 214.45-215.7.

¹⁰² Elizabeth Archibald, "Women and Romance," in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, eds. Henk Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University, 1990), 159. As quoted in Cherewatuk, "Pledging Troth," 1.

mercy throughout the story. Once mercy has been granted to him by Sir Gareth at the command of Lyness, Lynet quickly arrives to tend to the wounds of both Sir Gareth and the Red Knight of the Red Lands. She does this without being asked and without any words on her part; this suggests that Lynet has a genuine concern for others, even her enemies, and that she is proactive in helping people. This highlighting of Christian virtue and love on Lynet's part puts her as a precursor and parallel to Sir Perceval's sister, who, as Benskin suggests,¹⁰³ is a type of Christ-figure in Malory's "*The Sankgreal*." It is also indicative of the agency she has; she may not be narratively allowed to use a sword, but she is able to freely heal and reconcile.

Lynet's initial healing of Sir Gareth and the Red Knight of the Red Lands is even more noteworthy when the story fails to note who heals Sir Gareth of his wound received during his first encounter with Lynet's zombie knight. Sir Gareth received a wound "foyne thorow the thycke of the thygh, that the wounde was a shafttemonde brode and had cutte a-too many vaynes and synewys"¹⁰⁴ from Lynet's knight. Once the fight is over and the family has arrived to see what happened and they have discussed what was going on, Lynet tells Sir Gareth that "'all shall be for your worshyp and us all.' And so within a whyle Sir Gareth was nyghe hole, and waxed lyght and jocounde, and sange and daunced-"¹⁰⁵ While Lynet is next to the healing in the narrative, it is not clear who tends to his wounds.

The delay in Lynet's second healing of Sir Gareth is different and may be suggestive of her desire to keep Sir Gareth and Lyness from consummating their relationship before the wedding ceremony. After the second attack, Lynet does not heal his wounds so quickly: "Than was Sir

¹⁰³ Benskin, "Perceval's Sister."

¹⁰⁴ Malory, "Sir Gareth," 207.5-7.

¹⁰⁵ Malory, "Sir Gareth," 207.40-42.

Gareth staunched of his bledynge; but the lechis seyde there was no man that bare the lyff sholde heale hym thorowly of his wounde but yf they heled them that caused the stroke by enchauntemente.”¹⁰⁶ Then the story immediately transitions to King Arthur’s court and the arrival of Sir Gareth’s mother; and we do not come back to Sir Gareth’s wound until shortly before the tournament at Lyness’ castle, when Sir Gareth laments his inability to participate in the tournament because he never fully recovered from the wound, and Lynet then tells him “Be ye of good chere...for I undirtake within this fyftene dayes to make you as hole and as lusty as ever ye were.”¹⁰⁷ As Cherewatuk discusses, the concern to prevent sex could be out of concern for Lyness’ religious integrity, her social honor (as well as Sir Gareth’s), and maintaining the integrity of any children and inheritance that may be produced from their relationship.¹⁰⁸ By letting the castle doctors tend Gareth’s wound, Lynet both ensures that Sir Gareth does not die, but also, as they noted, that he cannot be fully healed and as capable of consummating the relationship until Lynet herself heals him. She heals him just in time for him to successfully participate in the tournament, thus minimizing the risk of consummation and ensuring that Sir Gareth will be ready to win the tournament and Lyness. This is a simple yet practical manner for Lynet to show compassion and care for Sir Gareth, her sister, and their relationship. It also exemplifies how Lynet has agency through her intellect and not just her enchantments or reliance on chivalric violence. Cherewatuk’s argument shows the reasons Lynet may have proceeded this way.

¹⁰⁶ Malory, “Sir Gareth,” 208.31-35.

¹⁰⁷ Malory, “Sir Gareth,” 213.3-5.

¹⁰⁸ Cherewatuk, “Pledging Troth,” 1-23.

Adding further nuance to Lynet's motivations for keeping Sir Gareth and Lyness apart is the belief in Malory's time, as discussed by Joan Cadden, that frequent sex made women stronger and men weaker.¹⁰⁹ Once Sir Gareth is wounded by the zombie knight and Lynet does not heal him, the castle leeches do so (even though she is the only one who can fully heal him). Since Lynet is supportive of Sir Gareth participating in the tournament to win Lyness, and she does eventually heal him, continuing to prevent Sir Gareth from having sex could have been, medically speaking, a way of ensuring his health would recuperate and be at his best potential for the tournament so he could win.

Larry Benson notes how, narratively, the tournament at Castle Perelous:

“functions not only as part of both the themes of courtship and proof-of-knighthood but also as a sort of necessary penance for Gareth and Lyones' “overhasty” behavior, and the attempted sin itself thus serves as a symbolic lowly position from which Gareth will rise by means of the proof-of-knighthood theme that informs the second half of the tale.”¹¹⁰

Benson's analysis fits nicely with my reading of Lynet because it is her boldness and initiative which helps Sir Gareth devise the plan for the tournament, instead of the plan being Sir Gareth's alone. While Maureen Fries suggests that, both in general and specifically in “Sir Gareth,” Malory implies that “wedlock restrains knightly development, and has kept Gawain's brother in that perpetual state of chivalric juvenescence which makes his unexpected death at the hands of

¹⁰⁹ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993), 115-6. As quoted in Cherewatuk, “Marriage in Malory,” XX. Also see Helen Rodnite Lemay, trans. *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992).

¹¹⁰ Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1976), 106. As quoted in Cherewatuk, “Pledging Troth,” 5.

his more accomplished (and deliberately unmarried) friend and mentor, Lancelot, all the more poignant,”¹¹¹ Lynet’s insistence that her preventing Sir Gareth’s early bedding with Lyness may have as much to do with Lynet’s concern for Sir Gareth’s budding reputation as with concern for her sister. Such plans for Sir Gareth’s increased worship could be what Lynet referred to each time Sir Gareth confronted her about the zombie knight and her clear role in sending it to stop Sir Gareth and Lyness from having sex. She makes it clear to Sir Gareth that he needs more worship, and she then helps him finalize the plan. This increases his worship and allows more time to pass between Sir Gareth and Lyness until we finally see King Arthur confronting both of them about what they want to be, married or lovers, and both are definite about marrying.

Immediately following in the passage where Lynet finally heals Sir Gareth is another detail showing her intelligence and the respect Sir Gareth gives her for it. Lynet tells Sir Gareth what the order of battle will be for the tournament, when she tells him to summon Sir Persaunte of Inde and Sir Ironsyde (the Red Knight) of the Red Lands with all their knights ““and than shall ye be able to macche wyth Kynge Arthure and his knyghtes.””¹¹² When Lyness had arranged the tournament with King Arthur, it was under the assumption that Sir Gareth was off adventuring somewhere unknown and that the tournament would be between Lyness’ knights and King Arthur’s. So why have Lynet tell Sir Gareth what to do? It suggests both her care for her family (which now includes Sir Gareth, practically speaking, as the whole tournament is a set up to be the catalyst for their marriage) and the respect that everyone has for her; from Lyness, their

¹¹¹ Maureen Fries, “How Many Roads to Camelot? The Married Knight in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” in *Culture and the King, the Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend: Essays in honor of Valerie M. Lagorio*, eds. Martin B. Schichtman and James P. Carley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 204.

¹¹² Malory, “Sir Gareth,” 213.9-15.

brother Sir Gryngamour, and Sir Gareth. No one contests her, and the story says it was done as she said, so everyone clearly had a great amount of respect for her wisdom and decision-making.

Sir Gryngamour's youth and inexperience could be why the story never even mentions the fact that apparently Sir Gryngamour never challenged the Red Knight of the Red Lands himself in order to save his own family; he and his sisters knew it would be suicide. This could explain why he never makes complaint about being saved, because he was wise enough to listen to the advice, or orders, of Lynet as the head of the family. This makes a good case for why Lynet was outside the castle trying to find a knight to save them and why Sir Gryngamour stayed inside the castle, never sallying forth to challenge the Red Knight of the Red Lands; instead, staying safely inside while Lynet, and 40 other knights, risked their lives and well-being trying to lift the siege. Lynet clearly had a sense of power and responsibility, and this could be why she is the one to venture out of the castle in order to look for help. She, more than the others, feels the need to leave to seek help, and is able to. It is interesting to note that both when giving the tournament advice and her leaving the castle are not presented as actions that were contested. Either Lyness and Sir Gryngamour willingly let Lynet leave or, dissenting, Lynet left anyway. These are ideas suggestive of Lynet being the one that the family looked up to for direction and support, regardless of age or gender.

Lynet also acts as a kind of elder sibling or parent in the sense that she is the one who mediates between other siblings: her own and with Sir Gareth and Sir Gawayne. Lynet mediates Lyness in her relationship with Sir Gareth in between the adventures of the siege of Castle Perelous and the tournament. Lynet also intercedes between Sir Gareth and his brother, Sir Gawayne, shortly after the tournament, when, after having just defeated the Deuke de la Rowse,

Sir Gawayne comes upon him and they start fighting immediately, without knowing who the other is. Malory says they fight for two hours before “at the laste there com the damesell Lyonette that som men calle the Damesell Savyage. And she com rydyngge uppon an ambelyngge mule, and there she cryed all on hygh, ‘Sir Gawayne, leve thy fyghtyngge with thy brothir, Sir Gareth!’”¹¹³ At this point the fighting stops and both brothers surrender to the other. As William Fitzhenry says, “Malory’s knightly narrative emphasizes action over thoughtful interpretation,”¹¹⁴ and it is interesting that the more complicated plots (like abducting Sir Gareth’s dwarf, the plan of battle for the tournament, and the social identification of the different knights) move on the intelligence of Lyness and Lynet, while it is merely performed by the knights. Not only is Lynet physically bold and brave, but she also exhibits intellectual skill and boldness. This action on her part once again represents her care for the well-being of others, desire for peace, and her virtuous bravery as she actively seeks to achieve her ends, even if it could be dangerous to her.

It is also interesting that Malory qualifies her epithet. He does not simply call her the savage damsel, nor does he say all men, or all people, call her savage, but rather “som men.” This qualifying statement serves as a point of contemplation and dichotomy. Some call her savage, but not all. Perhaps some see her as responsible for bringing forty knights to their certain death, or consider her treatment of some people, like Sir Gareth “Bewmaynes,” to be vocally savage and cruel. Yet others, like myself, consider her to be “savyage” in the sense of her wildness and valiance, and having a rather sad and compassionate comportment, even if it

¹¹³ Malory, “Sir Gareth,” 222.41-44.

¹¹⁴ William Fitzhenry, “Comedies of Contingency: Language and Gender in the *Book of Sir Tristram*,” *Arthuriana* 14, no. 4 (2004): 8-9. As quoted in Cherewatuk, “Pledging Troth,” 1.

does not always seem readily apparent. By giving such a qualifying description at the end of the story, Malory may have intended for his audience to note it, and pause...to wonder why she is given this epithet, at this particular time, and why.

In this same passage, we once again get an idea of the respect she is given by Sir Gareth and even Sir Gawayne, as she prompts them, once they have made peace with each other, asking them what they will do, and immediately saying they ought to tell King Arthur what is going on. They immediately consent and ask her to go to King Arthur as messenger, as their horses are hurt, which she observed; but only after she has first staunched their wounds. Again, she does this to both sides and of her own volition, without either of them asking or demanding. Once King Arthur and his entourage, including the mother of Sir Gareth and Sir Gawayne, arrive, the story makes a point to say Lynet completely healed them of their wounds.¹¹⁵

In the next lines, we see another time when Lynet acts as a leader of the family, as well as her boldness. King Arthur says, “I mervayle that youre sistyr, Dame Lyonesse, comyth nat hydir to me; and in especiall that she commyth nat to vysyte hir knyght, my nevewe, Sir Gareth, that hath had so mucche travayle for hir love,”¹¹⁶ to which Lynet asks his understanding since Lyness does not know that Sir Gareth is there. This shows King Arthur’s wonder both at the absence of Lyness and the presence of Lynet, since King Arthur expected the one and not the other. Lynet’s plain, matter-of-fact answer makes it sound as if such is normal to Lynet, and it is; she is always the one in the story to be out on adventures, in a “savyage” way.

¹¹⁵ Malory, “Sir Gareth,” 224.3-5.

¹¹⁶ Malory, “Sir Gareth,” 224.6-9.

Once Lyness comes to where King Arthur and Sir Gareth are, King Arthur quickly establishes their intent to marry and arranges for the wedding to be held on Michaelmas. Almost as an aside, we are told:

uppon Myghelmas day the Bysshop of Caunturbyry made the weddyng betwene Sir Gareth and Dame Lyoness with grete solempnyté. And Kynge Arthure made Sir Gaherys to wedde the Damesell Saveage, Dame Lynet. And Sir Aggravayne Kynge Arthure made to wedde Dame Lyonesseis neese, a fayre lady: hir name was Dame Lawrell.¹¹⁷

While this may be simply Malory making the happy ending of Lyness and Sir Gareth happier by marrying Lynet and a hitherto-unknown niece, my interpretation of Lynet allows a deeper reading. Lynet is married to Sir Gaherys, one of Sir Gareth's brothers. This is significant because it is solidifying the blood ties between the two families by not just one marriage but by two; both of the sisters to Sir Gareth and one of his brothers. There is no backstory, but given Lynet's concern for the honor of Lyness and Sir Gareth, it would make sense that the particular knight she married was also Sir Gareth's brother. Doing so would do even more to protect and glorify the family of Lyness and Lynet, as well as bringing their brother, Sir Gryngamour, into better circles for his own marriage and tutelage under the accomplished knights of the Round Table.

Lynet being summarily given away in marriage without any known build up or consent could be read as Sir Gareth's final defeat of Lynet as the chief obstacle to his fame and matrimonial desires. As a trope of the romances, though, it does bear an echo of the earlier

¹¹⁷ Malory, "Sir Gareth," 225.30-35.

characteristic of some early medieval English, Icelandic, and Irish tales where the most difficult, or final, opponent is a woman.¹¹⁸

In conclusion, the story of “Sir Gareth” may obviously be a medieval romance, but the character of Lynet provides a powerful counter to romance tropes and chivalric values. Lynet is not simply found and rescued, she takes an active role in rescuing her family and is actively seeking those who can help her; even with great danger to herself and others, as well as the emotional trauma of seeing her family besieged, leaving them and wandering for months, bringing hope with a knight and watching her hope get hanged, forty times, until she is finally assisted by what she thinks is a kitchen knave. In line with Ruth Lexton’s argument that Arthurian kingship and chivalric culture are under a suspect light in *Le Morte Darthur*,¹¹⁹ Lynet’s story of her Christian heroism and virtue serves as a mirror to reflect on the violence of feudal society, as well as the social, political, and martial roles of men and women. Her concern for her family drives her to incredible action and through great suffering. She shows great self-sacrifice, patience, and love of others; acting as a parallel precursor to Sir Perceval’s sister in the Grail Quest, both acting as representatives of a more spiritual, particularly Christian, sense of bravery and virtue. Both help those who are in need and wounded. Both seek the good of their family. Both willingly risk death in pursuit of their goals. Lynet stands out as a heroine in the tale of “Sir Gareth” who represents something different and more than the typical knightly values; yet she does so while operating inside of the chivalric world. Lynet is truly a “savage” damsel.

¹¹⁸ William Sayers, “Grendel’s Mother, Icelandic Grýla and Irish Nechta Scéne: Eviscerating Fear,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16/17 (1996/1997): 256-268.

¹¹⁹ Ruth Lexton, “Kingship in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110, no. 2 (March 2011): 173-201.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In these works and characters across two broad times and cultures, it is clear that women are not mere prizes or passive figures, nor are they limited to the social/familial role of peace-weaver, but rather they can fill a variety of violent and active roles. Grendel's mother is a potent warrior and honorable; that she is a woman and mother of Grendel serves to highlight and expand her strength and loyalty to both family and honor. Her contrast with Queen Wealhtheow highlights how women were able to navigate both roles and do so powerfully. Judith fills many roles as saint, noble leader, tactician, seductress, and assassin, in a manner that shows how early medieval Christianity blended in a unique way with the early medieval English cultures. Lynet does not bear arms like Grendel's Mother and Judith; nevertheless, she is resourceful, brave, and successfully navigates her political and social surroundings to save her family and elevate their status through association with King Arthur's court.

Grendel's mother, Judith, and Lynet are all intelligent, strong, and loyal. Grendel's mother is disciplined in strictly following blood-feud despite the emotional trauma of her son's death, Judith contrives to seduce and kill Holofernes, and Lynet continually uses her intellect to further her interests. Grendel's mother is a much deadlier fighter than her son, Judith is brave and strong enough to volunteer to go unarmed into the hands of her enemy, and Lynet is strong enough to venture out and persist despite great risk and emotional stress. Grendel's mother is willing to die in order to avenge her son, Judith risks her life to save her city, and Lynet also risks her life in order to save her brother and sister from siege.

Despite strong similarities, there are also significant differences. Grendel's mother and Judith both enter an area of enemy where they are outnumbered and kill with their own hands;

Lynet relies on her ability to outwit and manipulate men to perform her violence, or she uses sorcery. In this way they are all mentally armed, but Lynet is not given access to physical arms or armor. Judith is driven by ties to her city, whereas Grendel's mother and Lynet seem more driven by familial bonds. Grendel's mother and Judith operate in a largely city-state/tribal environment, while Lynet is maneuvering both a more politically diverse yet chaotic landscape. Judith is the protagonist of her story, whereas Grendel's mother is an enemy to the protagonist and Lynet is a secondary character, yet vital to the plot.

In both time periods and cultures, women are able to exert social and political power, but martial power is lost by the time of Malory and *Le Morte Darthur*. Women can no longer take up arms openly and fight. Silence is only able to do so under the guise of being a man.¹²⁰ Lynet must rely on men, good or bad, or use magical means to do what she wants. These examples are representative of a larger shift in literature and culture which both honors women by protecting them, but also objectifies them and attempts to control them. Despite these tendencies, women like Lynet are still surprisingly violent, powerful, and active characters, which belies ideas that female characters were as passive, irrelevant, or even malicious, as what some of the male characters, authors, or later readers say.

It is somewhat ironic that, to use popular language, the people of the Dark Ages honored and empowered women in a broader manner than the civilized and Christian societies of the later Medieval and Renaissance periods. In the modern debates and discussions about gender-roles and prejudice, it is important to not think of equality as something that is always and inherently on a line of improvement historically. The past may have some terrible examples, but at the

¹²⁰ *Silence*, trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi, Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1992.

same time it can also highlight different perspectives and approaches. The characters of Lynet, Grendel's mother, and Judith show how women have often had roles that are different but no less violent and active than men, and they should serve as models of hope and inspiration.

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