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### Ride of the Waelcyrges : Combating Notions of Feminine Passivity and Monstrous Deviance in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Shaina Marie Strang-Wolf Tullo

Montclair State University, tulloschai@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This paper endeavors to trace the Anglo-Saxon literary figure of the *waelcyrge* through all twelve references to her throughout the Anglo-Saxon corpus, and culminates in an application of the *waelcyrge* trope to two problematic heroines in *Beowulf*, Modthryth and Hygd. Given the critical history associated with the *waelcyrge*, this paper attempts to write against the dominant assumption in Anglo-Saxon scholarship that the *waelcyrge* is a derivative of the Norse valkyrie. Instead, this paper is predicated on the notion that the *waelcyrge* represents uniquely Anglo-Saxon values that volley between the cultural shift that occurs in the mid-ninth century through the emergence of the *comitatus*.

Throughout the various analyses of the *waelcyrge* source material and, also, its application to *Beowulf*, one sees an emergence of feminine mythological constructs, in which the *waelcyrge* demonstrates tremendous elasticity. Throughout these texts, we see an amalgamation of the warrior woman motif with supernatural tethering to nature. We also see a symbolic veneration of gynecological and obstetric biological processes, including menstruation, conception, and birth, through the incorporation of warrior and military metaphors. To this end, the *waelcyrge* emerges as a complex didacticism regarding feminine bodily autonomy, and the various anxieties associated with sexual freedom and repression.

This paper concludes with the suggestion that the readings of the Anglo-Saxon woman as relegated to one end of a peaceweaving/monstrous binary need not exist. The *waelcyrge* demonstrates, throughout her sources, the subjective and elastic fidelity to real-life female experiences. For this reason, the paper concludes with a discussion on *Beowulf's* problematic heroines. Hygd is frequently interpreted as the ideal-queen, whose peaceweaving passivity

ensures the survival of her tribe. Modthryth, conversely, is associated with feminine monstrosity and wanton violence. Examining these women within the context of the *waelcyrge* illuminates the lack of polarity in these figures, and the way in which both demonstrate political and militaristic cunning that greatly exceeds their male counterparts.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Ride of the Waelcyrges: Combating Notions of Feminine Passivity  
and Monstrous Deviance in Anglo-Saxon Literature

by

Shaina Strang-Wolf Tullo

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

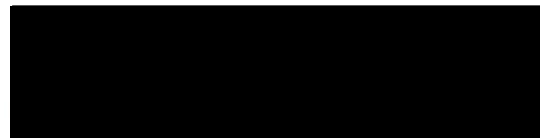
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Thesis Sponsor - Lee Behlman

Department of English



Committee Member - Naomi C. Liebler



Committee Member - Alison Bevinger

RIDE OF THE *WÆLCYRGES*: COMBATING NOTIONS OF FEMININE PASSIVITY AND  
MONSTROUS DEVIANCE IN ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements For the degree of Master of the Arts

by

SHAINA MARIE STRANG-WOLF TULLO

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2020

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my loving husband and best friend, Nick Strang-Wolf, who is my guidepost and light, and who encouraged me throughout my entire graduate journey. Thank you for believing in me, even when I myself do not. I would also be remiss if I did not thank Lee Behlman, my wonderful mentor and friend, for keeping the tone of this process joyful. Your classes have always been an absolute delight, and to write for you is never a chore. I wish to thank Naomi Liebler, with whom I began and ended my graduate school journey, and who embodies the spirit of the *waelcyrge*. I also wish to thank Alison Beringer for her commitment to medievalism and this project. Finally, I wish to thank Kait Tonti and Batman Strang-Wolf, my two dear friends (one human and one canine), who consistently and doggedly keep me grounded and sane.

--Shaina Strang-Wolf Tullo, December 2019

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In her seminal 2005 work *The Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, Jane Chance attempts to establish that which had previously been viewed as essentially impossible by scholars, namely Clare Lees and Gillian R. Overing,<sup>1</sup> to “highlight the strength of the female characterization [in Anglo-Saxon epic], given the literary social ideal of the aristocratic woman as primarily a passive, peaceful, and colorless addition to society” (xiv). Indeed, the colorlessness of the Anglo-Saxon female, in both the Anglo-Saxon corpus and the scholarship surrounding her, is all too palpable. Yet, the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon woman’s colorlessness is a radical departure from previous scholarship, which labeled her absent. The absent Anglo-Saxon woman has become a bit of a riddle for feminist scholars in the last two decades, who seek to write against her silence, finding color and presence in an archive of absent voices. No text has been subjected to this pursuit more than *Beowulf*, which, for centuries, has been held up as the gold standard for masculine heroism. J.R.R. Tolkien’s celebrated lecture, “Beowulf, the Monsters, and the Critics,” has been held up as the authority of *Beowulf* scholarship since its original delivery in 1936. In his lecture, Tolkien asks its readership not merely to appreciate the poem’s formal achievements, but also to exalt its celebration of masculine virtues and heroism: “Let us by all means esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall” (7). Tolkien elects to quantify the “old heroes” of epic as exclusively

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<sup>1</sup> This claim derives from the wonderful 2001 text *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, particularly their section on “present voices, absent names” (83). See also “The Clerics and the Critics: Misogyny and The Social Symbolic in Anglo-Saxon England” (28). See Paul Szarmach’s *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England* for an overview of theological documents censoring or absence of female bodies (115). It is worth noting that these scholars do excellent work in reconstructing Anglo-Saxon feminine identity in lieu of archival absent. Their works, however, serve as exemplars in the absent Anglo-Saxon female phenomenon both in their intense surveying of the archive in and of itself and, also, in the extensive overviews their work provides of previous centuries of Anglo-Saxon scholarship.

male, thus setting up Anglo-Saxon heroism as diametrically opposed to feminine experiences. What, then, can we say of the women in this ancient epic? Tolkien's lecture, revolutionary in its time, mentions women only once, citing "fair women" as a supplement to the godly hero, a kind of reward for his great deeds (10). Indeed, this framework of re-instantiating the male hero of ancient epic as the agential figure has persisted in the dominant scholarship surrounding *Beowulf* until very recently. Thus is the charge of female absence and colorlessness that Chance writes against.

Scholars of other medieval epics are quick to recognize the dimensionality of female heroines. Norse epics, namely the *Eddas*, and the scholarship surrounding it is replete with analyses of dynamic, robustly feminist figures.<sup>2</sup> No figure best counters the Anglo-Saxon woman's constructed passivity than the Norse Valkyrie. Bold, ferocious, sexually-charged--the Valkyrie who decorate the *Eddas* are ever present in moments of battle, choosing those who live or die, transporting souls to Valhalla, and exploring sexual relationships with both mortals and deities. Her power and presence in the *Eddas* are obvious, "On all sides saw I / Valkyries assemble, Ready to ride / to the ranks of the gods" (31). The ability to transverse various planes of existence, and to "ride / to the ranks of the gods" underscores the Valkyrie's tremendous power. Here, the juxtaposition between the Norse Valkyrie and the Anglo-Saxon female is palpable. Where the Anglo-Saxon female seems entirely absent or colorless, the Norse Valkyrie is numerous and dynamic. While the Anglo-Saxon female exudes passivity, the Valkyrie

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<sup>2</sup> This tradition begins early. An early example of this is Katharine Susan Anthony's 1915 *Feminism in Germany and Scandinavia*, which makes the following bold claim: "The most planned woman in all of mythology is the creation of the Germanic and Scandanavian folklore. The Valkyrie has no equal in Oriental or Southern myths"(205). See also Serinity Young's delightfully titled 2018 book *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, and Other Airborne Females*, as well as Paul Acker and Carolyn Larrington's 2013 *Revisiting the Poetic Eddas*, and Jenny Jochens's 2015 *Women in Old Norse Literature*.

transverses the limits of godly power, functioning as she who wroughts fate and punishment and immortality. Recent scholarship picks up this trend, exploring the way in which her robust feminine representation forces a Norse populus to interrogate “a man’s masculinity and putative deviations from the sexual norm” (Clark 16). So ubiquitous is her strength and courage that she is still a conspicuous presence in Western culture, whether that be in recurrent stagings of opera or in pop-culture iterations such as Marvel movies.

That the Norse Valkyrie is so ingrained in Western understandings of mythologized females is unquestionable. Yet, the exploration of her seeming counterpart in Anglo-Saxon literature is almost nonexistent. The *waelcyrge*, a figure in her own right, appears faintly yet consistently throughout the Anglo-Saxon corpus, offering a multidimensional picture of the Anglo-Saxon mythologized female heretofore underexplored. Although seemingly less provocative than her Norse counterpart, the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* possesses a complexity worthy of further exploration--a complexity that may greatly exceed her Norse counterpart. The Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* exists in direct opposition to the traditional binary of peaceweaver or monstrous deviant forced upon female characters in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. Rather, the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* is a figure who marries ferocity and fecundity, warcraft and domesticity. This paper will endeavor to trace the *waelcyrge* tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature, with specific focus on the various source material in which she appears, as well as in her culmination as a guiding force behind *Beowulf*'s problematic heroines, Modthryth and Hygd.

The scholarly attention surrounding the *waelcyrge* in any text is scant, with only a handful of scholars even referencing the *waelcyrge* at all and even fewer delving into its details at length. These inquiries seem to volley between two main interpretations; the *waelcyrge* is an

Anglo-Saxon synonym for *wiccan* [witch] or she is a loanword recording an intersection of Anglo-Saxon culture with Norse mythology. Both interpretations reduce the *waelcyrge* by ignoring the complexities of her representation in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. The history of the *waelcyrge*'s appearance in twentieth century scholarly sources supports this hypothesis.<sup>3</sup> Those scholars who do not participate in the *waelcyrge*-as-witch interpretation engage in a more complex methodology of comparative analysis, by coding the *waelcyrge* as a mere allusion to the Norse Valkyrie or Greco-Roman mythological tradition.<sup>4</sup> The most recent champion of the *waelcyrge*, Helen Damico, has dedicated an entire career to arguing for the relevance of the valkyrie tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature, best exemplified through her seminal 1980 publication of *Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. Despite the wide scope of Damico's research, she is candid in her interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* as being a derivative of the Norse valkyrie tradition. Damico's argument is replete with intense research into the Beowulf manuscript's intersectionality with Norse mythology. Damico's book, intensely focused and meticulously researched, argues for the *waelcyrge*'s representation in the Anglo-Saxon corpus as literary allusion to intensely preserved Norse valkyrie tradition. Virtually all of the scholarly attention follows one of two trends, either in glossing over the complexity of the

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<sup>3</sup> James Hastings' 1922 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, the apparent starting-point of scholarly attention to the *waelcyrge*, notes that "the waelcyrge are classed together as 'undesirable people'" (252). Some early-twentieth-century attention to the *waelcyrge* followed, with a brief but striking commentary by H. Munro Chadwick, who observed that the "waelcyrge are not unfrequently mentioned in Anglo-Saxon literature" (412). Since then, the *waelcyrge* has been referenced to varying degrees, almost always via an association with a witch figure. Williams, for example, likens the figure of Judith in Anglo-Saxon epic to a *waelcyrge* figure, which, for Williams, establishes Judith as a deviant, almost monstrous female on par with the witch (458). Buckland's *Book of Saxon Witchcraft* establishes the *waelcyrge* as synonymous with the Anglo-Saxon *wiccan* (47).

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell explores the various references to the *waelcyrge* in the Latin/Anglo-Saxon glosses as an Anglo-Saxon word signifying the Greek Furies, though admittedly notes that the gloss history is murky and debatable (224). For Stephen Glosecki, the *waelcyrge* is an "unromanticized fury figure" (116). Likewise, Davidson references the *waelcyrge* as the 'chooser of the slain' or the Old English equivalent of the Furie (93). For Glosecki, this is a "heathen German" appropriation of "fierce female" from classical antiquity (116, 127).

Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* as an appropriation of Norse mythology or recognizing her as a distinctive, mostly negative, witch figure. These vastly different and methodologically complex arguments serve as a method of reducing the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* to mere Norse allusion without reading her against the Anglo-Saxon culture in which she appears, or seriously interrogating the socio-historical contexts of the sources that preserve her legacy. Alexander Krappe, for example, makes measurable, albeit small, strides in understanding of the *waelcyrge* as an Anglo-Saxon figure in her own right, by reversing the traditional understanding of the *waelcyrge* in noting that the “valkyrie myth has roots in English culture” (57). While Krappe’s argument is valid, it is my contention that serious inquiry into the *waelcyrge* may offer distinct insight into the Anglo-Saxon perception of femininity. The *waelcyrge* in her sporadic but noteworthy sources obliterates the traditional binary of the domestic/agentially monstrous female and, instead, marries those two representations. The *waelcyrge* dwells in gray area, representing inclusion of feminine experience under the sign of the militaristic hero, a notable departure from the ferocious yet sterile Norse valkyrie. The *waelcyrge* does not represent one side of a binary; she amalgamates the complexity of feminine experience.

In order to examine the *waelcyrge* tradition as it pertains to *Beowulf* and the eleventh-century politic, we must first survey the representation of the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* as she exists within the Anglo-Saxon corpus. Appearing twelve times in Anglo-Saxon literature,<sup>5</sup> the *waelcyrge*, as I have discussed, is often read as a reappropriation of the Norse valkyrie tradition. In her most extreme representation, she has been read as Anglo-Saxon anachronism--a reduction the Valkyrie to a witch or *haegtessan* as a more apt representation of feminine

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<sup>5</sup> This figure was derived consulting Phillip Smith’s 1978 *A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*.

empowerment in the Anglo-Saxon zeitgeist. However, the Anglo-Saxon corpus clearly formulates a more distinct, complex mythologized female than scholarship gives her credit for. It is my contention that the Anglo-Saxon sources will reveal that *waelcyrge* does not exist as a figure of polarity, but, instead, a figure whose complexity exemplifies the gamut of feminine experience. Rather than operating exclusively as a bloodthirsty, feminized warrior, the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge* is a paradoxically dichotomous female--one who is associated with both life and death, whose association with nature functions as an antithesis to and an affirmation of hierarchical, ordered society, and, most important, a wild figure who is also tameable. Despite these dualities, the *waelcyrge* is almost always inevitable--that she is at once wild and tameable is intimately tethered to the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the feminine experience. This is not, however, a story of suppression so much as it is one of moderation, of evening, of subjective gray areas. In my discussion below, the figurations of the *waelcyrge* in the Anglo-Saxon corpus will be examined via a genre analysis rather than chronologically, given that the dating of these various occurrences is frequently debated. She is represented via five subgenres: the Latin/Anglo-Saxon glosses, the mirabilic tradition of *Wonders of the East*, the homiletic tradition of Wulfstan, the Anglo-Saxon charms, and, finally, in *Beowulf*. It is important to note that the latter, which does not mention the *waelcyrge* by name, does allude to her heavily in its imagery and, therefore, is necessary for a comprehensive overview of the *waelcyrge* tradition.

The most concentrated representation of the *waelcyrge* occurs in Latin/Anglo-Saxon glosses of the Greco-Roman mythological pantheon.<sup>6</sup> Although these glosses represent the majority of representations of the *waelcyrge*, they are repetitive in nature, yet this repetition is

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<sup>6</sup> I have used the Thomas Wright Anglo-Saxon glosses published by Trubner & Company, 1884, as reference, given the authority placed on this gloss for subsequent publications.

important in examining the profound way in which *waelcyrge* resists the typical binary of Anglo-Saxon feminine representation. In these glosses, she exclusively appears via a parenthetical explanation of Greco-Roman deities. Throughout these ninth-century glosses, she is paired with the following deities: Allecto, Bellona, Tisiphone, Herinis, Ueneris. The intense repetition of the qualifier “*waelcyrge*” within these glosses serves to demonstrate the normative nature of the *waelcyrge* as a mechanism for making sense of foreign deities. In fact, the sheer range of deities referenced here serves to represent the malleability of the *waelcyrge* trope, as the deities presented in these glosses are widely different. Allecto and Tisiphone, sisters in some accounts, are the named Furies, who are associated with wrath, moral corruption, and the underworld. Allecto’s second gloss references her not merely as *waelcyrge*, but also as “*tessa*,” an Anglo-Saxon abbreviation of “*haegtessa*.” For scholars such as Christopher Jones, this suggests that “the elasticity in such terms may be more apparent than real, a distortion created by the paucity of sources. Any original specificity to terms like *hægtesse* or *burhrune* may also have quickly eroded as converted elites among the Anglo-Saxons increasingly lumped all such beings into a single category of the demonic” (432). While these glosses may seem to reduce or simplify the Greek conception of the Furies, one may assume the glossators could have had a basic understanding of the Greek Furies and their connection to fertility due to their link to the underworld. Thus, we see a link of wrath and destruction with fertility--two seemingly incongruous elements of femininity that later traditions of the *waelcyrge* will mirror. The *waelcyrge*, therefore, operates on neither side of the binary, suggesting a merging of two extremes, one that potentially expands the representation of Anglo-Saxon motherhood. Linking the intensity of the Furies with fecundity seemingly questions the Anglo-Saxon understanding of

motherhood, which for many gynecological and obstetric sources, is likened to extreme passivity, sainthood, and submission<sup>7</sup>. For Jones, this potentially indicates that “it is also possible that these terms were never tidy to begin with but straddled the divides of human/inhuman or natural/supernatural, or that they collapsed functions that Greco-Roman mythologies assigned to distinct deities or *longaevi*” (432). The irreducible nature of the *waelcyrge* is further solidified by the inclusion of Ueneris, or Venus, who, in almost all her iterations, actively combats the wrathful ferocity traditionally associated with the *waelcyrge*. Her beauty, her fecundity, and her association with romantic couplings seems to indicate a complex, multidimensional understanding of the *waelcyrge*. This is especially so given that Ueneris/Venus is linked not merely to the *waelcyrge* in her gloss, but also to “gydene,” or goddess. That both Allecto and Ueneris are simultaneously glossed with the modifier *waelcyrge* suggests that the *waelcyrge* is an enriched figure who does not necessarily reduce the female to one modality, but one who encompasses a totality of female representation--one whose ferocity or prowess in warcraft need not exist in exclusion from her beauty, fertility, or goodness. The *waelcyrge*'s status as a mythological figure seems to write against the rigid categorization of feminine experience, in which feracity and ferocity need not be exclusionary feminine experiences.

As the gloss tradition explores a highly mythologized representation of the *waelcyrge*, the *mirabilis* tradition approaches such mythologized femininity with bizarre yet pragmatically coded imagery. While the *Wonders of the East* has often been discounted by scholars due to its highly bizarre, fantastical, nature, it has recently drawn scholarly attention, particularly in its representation of the monstrous feminine and the way in which feminine bodies

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<sup>7</sup> See Cotton Tiberius A for more details here. An excellent scholarly overview of this can be found in M.L. Cameron's *Anglo Saxon Medicine*.



metamorphosize.<sup>8</sup> Dana Oswald's comprehensive overview of *Wonders'* female monsters posits that "a female monster presents another dilemma: as a monster, she might be an immediate physical threat, but as a woman, she should not be although she might be threatening in other ways" (6). The *waelcyrge* appears twice in *Wonders*, both in seemingly monstrous forms, but, through their monstrosity, the author codes the female body as an autonomous space with fantastical mechanisms of protection against male hegemonic violence. The text states:

ÐA deor þonne

Hy mannes stefne gehy

Rað þonne fleoð hy feor

ÐA deor habbað eatha

Fet . waelcurian eagan. Twa heafdu gif

Him hwylc mon onfon wille þonne hiera lichoman

Ð hy onaelað syndon þa ubgefraelicu deor

[There are also born wild beasts. When those hear a man's voice, they will run far. There they have eight feet, valkyrie eyes, and two heads. If any *man* tries to touch them, they set their bodies on fire. These are extraordinary beasts] (2r 15-22, emphasis mine).<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, the female body here is extremely monstrous, characterized by duplications that increase their uncanniness. Yet, their monstrosity is utilitarian in nature, as it serves to render them

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<sup>8</sup> As the editors of the only scholarly edition of *Wonders* note, this text has not received scholarly attention for most of its presence in literary history due to the bizarre, fantastical elements. According to Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, who published the first ever scholarly edition of the text in 2013, the resistance of serious attention to this work has been a serious hindsight in Anglo-Saxon studies, as the text has been discounted as serious work due to its bizarre nature.

<sup>9</sup> All translations from Anglo-Saxon are mine, unless otherwise noted.

protected and therefore isolated from male invasion, conquest, or rape. Tragically, however, that protection comes at the cost of the female's destruction through her fantastical ability to self-immolate. The preservation-by-destruction motif of warped feminine empowerment is evident in other Anglo-Saxon sources, such as Ebba the Younger, whose famous instruction for fellow nuns in her nunnery to cut off their noses in the face of Viking raid/rape serves as a paradoxically agential yet tragic moment (qtd. in Schulenberg 48). Such is characterized in *Wonders* by the repetition of the male pronoun in "Hy mannes stefne gehy / Rað þonne fleoð hy feor" (16-17). Grammatically, one expects the dependent clause to lead into a qualifying statement regarding the monstrous female. Yet, the man's action (his voice) codes only into his own fear and flight. This serves not merely as an isolating mechanism for the female, but one that limits the possibility of the male gaze. Although these women have clearly been gazed upon (or else how would *Wonders* report her alarming appearance), their physicality functions not merely as spectacle but also in the rigid establishment of female body autonomy, made all the more real by her ability to self-immolate. Such agency seems to challenge traditional notions of feminine passivity, and, instead, gives fantastical agency to the victimized female. If only in the realm of fantasy, the female is able to attain bodily autonomy.

Even as the text of *Wonders* explicitly describe presents this male attempt at physical contact as a form of sexual violence, *Wonders'* robust illumination history and its association with fantastical, monstrous genitalia seems to code the attempt to touch the female body as one that is potentially erotic.<sup>10</sup> That the female body is (super)naturally able to defend against this act is remarkable, but that she must engage in an act of self-destruction in order to defend against

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<sup>10</sup> See Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim's wonderful chapter on monstrous genitalia in *Inconceivably Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript*.

invasive male contact is tragic. Here, *Wonders*, through the modality of fantasy, creates a kind of didactic spectacle, by which we might learn to pity the plight of not merely monstrous females, but all females, whose existence in an Anglo-Saxon social hierarchy is predicated upon avoiding male-violence, as in the Ebba nunnery documents. Thus, I would like to suggest that *Wonders* participates in a dialogue of female biology and autonomy that serves as a representation of the female condition coded through the highly fantastical imagery of a mirabilistic genre.

This is furthered through *Wonders*' second mention of the *waelcyrge*, in which we are told that Gorgoneus...thaet is waelcyrge [Gorgoneus is valkyrie-like). Here, we have a location that alludes to the Gorgon of Greek myth, a figure often presented as the symbolic inversion of the destructive male gaze and as a feminized apotropaic figure imbued with protective magic. In both cases in which the *waelcyrge* appears in *Wonders*, she is framed as a figure of feminine autonomy, whose monstrous appearance is not merely deviant but advantageous in maintaining an independent subject position, especially when threatened with male intrusion. The fantastical nature of the mirabilis codes this universal experience in the form of the fantastical other, though the mirabilis tradition is meant to inspire wonder and awe as well as disgust. As Oswald theorizes, the monsters in *Wonders* serves to illuminate the nature of "the monstrous woman [who] indicates that perhaps all women might exceed the boundaries placed around them," itself a position that volleys between monstrous relegation and feminine empowerment (7). Furthermore, neither representation in *Wonders* claims to represent a *waelcyrge* in her own right, but, much like the Latin glosses, serves as a simile by which readers can frame their experience with that which is different by utilizing the familiar trope of the *waelcyrge*. These monstrous women are not *waelcyrge*, but, are *waelcyrgeinc*. Thus, again, we come to experience the

*waelcyrge* not merely as the monstrous feminine but as the autonomous, empowered, victimless idealized female of myth.

This deeply-coded trope of female empowerment comes at a cost, however. As we trace the evolution of the *waelcyrge* in the Anglo-Saxon corpus, one notices a clear trend in which her representation becomes gradually more monstrous over time. Her monstrosity reaches a fever-pitch in the sermons of Wulfstan (and those of dubious authorship that were likely inspired by or written in his style) in the mid-ninth century. These sermons seem to indicate the first of the overly negative representations of the *waelcyrge* in the Anglo-Saxon corpus.<sup>11</sup> These sermons are stylistically similar, capitalizing upon asyndeton as a mechanism of building horror as each surveys the totality of sins committed. Wulfstan's 1014 *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* is an exemplar of this mode. Religious fervor seems to drive the use of such propagandistic rhetorical devices as a mechanism for justifying horrific acts against an ostensibly heathen other. The sermon hypothesizes that "there are many stained by sin throughout this land manslaughterers, kinslayers, priestlayers, church haters, those who weave murder...adulterers, whores, incests, fornicators, and many whores and here are witches and valkyries [*waelcyrges*]" (1). Here, one can notice a kind of ebb and flow of intensity of sin, in which there seems to be a non-hierarchized order, where a sin like "whoring" can appear multiple times on the list, punctuating crimes like incest and fornication. This medieval stream-of-consciousness does, however, important work in unveiling a religious perception of the *waelcyrge*, in which she is presented as a juxtaposition between the sexually lascivious and the witch. For the first time in the Anglo-Saxon corpus, the *waelcyrge* appears exclusively malevolent with no redeeming

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<sup>11</sup> As Corinne Saunders indicates, these sermons coincide with a series of horrific Viking raids, that plagued the English coast, provoking panic in the Anglo-Saxon church driven by religious fervor (193).

qualities. It is from Wulfstan that a majority of scholarship surrounding the *waelcyrge* is derived--a one dimensionality that a majority of the sources previously covered in this paper resist. In fact, unlike her presence in the glosses or in *Wonders of the East*, the Wulfstan *waelcyrge* is likened exclusively with a “stain [of] sin throughout the land,” one who is potentially the cause of God’s ire and the bringer of the Viking scourge. One must carefully consider the way in which the *waelcyrge*, herself oft considered a loan from the Norse mythos, exists independently in Wulfstan’s sermon and those of similar style; if the *waelcyrge* were indeed borrowed exclusively from Norse source material, that link would surely have been capitalized upon by Wulfstan.

The *waelcyrge*’s appearance in Wulfstan’s list of sins between “witch” and “whores,” seems to establish an anxiety about female sexual agency with perverse magic. Thus, we can come to understand the *waelcyrge* as a figure who is not merely supernatural, but one whose supernatural power is bound up to some degree with sexual experience or deviance. We likewise see this in the *Sermo ad Populum Dominicis Diebus*, in which a similar list is given to lead into the *waelcyrge*. This list includes “those who foresake their wives and take another and who have more than their rightful woman, witches and valkyries [*waelcyrges*] and assassins” (1). Here, we see the *waelcyrge* appear amidst those whose sexuality exceeds that which is considered normal for the traditional, christianized Anglo-Saxon audience of this homily. That sexual deviance links to witches, valkyries, and assassins, which binds the anxieties surrounding sexual deviance with violence and the supernatural. Although seemingly a random list, there are striking thematic similarities between the groupings throughout all of these sermons. Given the parameters of the homiletic style, the way in which the authors of these texts seem to group the offending sins into

thematic categories is of paramount importance. Thus, while the *waelcyrge* clearly is symbolically linked to witchery, her links to assassins and sexual deviance may seem less obvious, especially when considering the traditional Anglo-Saxon notion of the *haegtessa* as one who is sexually repulsive. The *waelcyrge*, then, is distinctive in terms of her physical appearance as well as in the way she manifests her supernatural prowess. This anxiety of a *waelcyrge* as one who is sexually corruptive may depart from or affirm previous links to Ueneris, given that figure's extreme beauty. Wulfstan's anxiety surrounding the *waelcyrge* may not be her physical disgust, but, rather, her powers of seduction.

*The Proclamation of 1020* sheds further light on the Anglo-Saxon conception of the *waelcyrge* as a woman driven to excesses. The proclamation cautions its listeners to “seek and love and honor god, who is mild, and all of us must avoid unrighteousness, the deeds of kinslayers, manslayers and murderers and perjurers and witches and valkyries and adulterers and incests” (1). Here, we see the author of the proclamation listing sins that seem to assault the mild and modest lifestyle associated with God. As a piece of propaganda, this sermon inexorably links feminine passivity with righteousness as it underscores the empowered *waelcyrge* as a harbinger of social and spiritual destruction. Linking the *waelcyrge* to perjurers and witches connects to the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition's association of witchcraft with a deception towards the gods or god, as the witch deceives us into believing her powers are at least semi-divine. Furthermore, this seems to theorize a kind of category crisis<sup>12</sup>, in which the author cautions us to “avoid unrighteousness, the deeds of...valkyries [*waelcyrges*]” (2). This seems to indicate that the *waelcyrge* need not be a separate, mythological entity but rather one whose

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<sup>12</sup> Here, I mean category crisis in the Jeffrey Jerome Cohen monster theory sense of the term, by which the monstrous being operates within multiple modalities, forcing societies to reexamine that which they consider status quo.

deeds can be replicated by mortal sinners. The *waelcyrge*, then, becomes a figure who is meant to inspire fear and disgust in female empowerment and encourage the type of feminine passivity and asexual existence perpetuated by many Christian theological documents. Historicizing this point is key, as Stephen Yeager indicates, the sermons of Wulfstan (and in his tradition or style), endure due to their “rare eye-witness accounts of the reign of Aethelred II. Wulfstan cites the Danish incursions into England as evidence for the moral decrepitude of the Anglo-Saxon people, and provides a powerful description of the Viking raids and their consequences” (78). *The Proclamation of 1020*, then, seeks to assign blame on every day females who engage in the deeds of *waelcyrge*s, whether that be sexual or militaristic in nature. These homiletic sources represent a departure from the *waelcyrge* tradition heretofore established in the Anglo-Saxon corpus, by which the *waelcyrge* functions as a demonization of female sexual agency while deploying her moral corruption as God’s justification for incurring Viking raids upon a seemingly innocent populus. The *waelcyrge* becomes a tool to discourage feminine agential activity, as the passive female is held up as ideal.

Such one-dimensional, uncompromising conceptions of the world rarely exist outside of homely. Examination of the *waelcyrge* in every-day writings explores more subjective representations of feminine experience. The most striking example of this is the *waelcyrge*’s appearance in Anglo-Saxon charms. The charms, written as poetic and magical recitations to ward off domestic ills, present a kind of *waelcyrge* who is neither destructive nor benevolent. For some scholars, this represents a deeply syncretic religious experience, “which transcend these simple categories of literary and cultural history” (Hill 145). The *waelcyrge* found within these texts is one of ontological balance, one who participates in the dichotomy of life and death, and

one who is inexorably linked to nature. More interestingly, the metrical charms provide gynecological and obstetric resistance to feminine passivity and, instead, ameliorate the female biological experiences by elevating through military imagery. The charm “Wið Færstice” [Against a Sudden Stitch] evokes the *waelcyrge*’s image, likening the “stitch,” or sudden cramp, to the haegtessan’s loud, screaming spear. This representation has been much commented upon by Helen Damico. For Damico, this moment, followed by the extended metaphor established within this poem, illustrates a clear allusion to the Norse valkyrien (148). One can clearly see the underlying connections to ancient Norse epic in the charm’s opening lines:

Hlūde wæran h̄y lā hlūde ðā h̄y ofer þone hlāw ridan  
 wæran ānmōde ðā h̄y ofer land ridan  
 scyld ðū ðē nū þū ðysne nīð genesan mōte  
 ūt l̄ytel spere gif h̄er inne s̄ie  
 stōd under linde under lēohtum scylde  
 þær ðā mihtigan wīf hyra mægen beræddon  
 h̄y gyllende gāras sændan (1-7)

[Loud were they, yes, as they rode over the burial mounds. They were fierce when they rode over the land. Shield yourself now so you can survive this assault. Out, little spear, if there is one inside here. Stood under the light shield, where those mighty women garnered their powers, I will send another back].

There is a palpable appeal to ancient epic here, wherein the construction of the warrior-woman as a metaphoric physical assault is artfully rendered, so much so that the original purpose of the metric charm seems to be obscured. Perhaps the author of this poem uses humor in a kind of



proto-mock-epical fashion in the representation of the “stitch,” or cramp. Although various scholars<sup>13</sup> have interpreted this passage along medical lines, likening it to the cramps one experiences with rheumatism, one might also consider the various feminine associations of this particular charm, given that the other metrical charms pertain to issues associated with female health and gynecology.<sup>14</sup> The stitch may refer to a menstrual cramp, one that is combated by the image of the ferocious warrior woman. The charm, replete with images of the body being pierced by various spears, may carry sexual connotations associated with the life/birth dichotomy, strengthened through the image of the loud woman, riding over the burial mound. This is an image of the screaming woman as mourning or avenging death while simultaneously evoking childbirth. For L.M.C. Weston, the image of the mound coupled with various glosses such as *ganae* liken the experience of the stitch “with female sexuality, the area of female life most remote from male control and consequently that most fraught with danger. We may well wonder whether such images, replete with such dangerous and frightening ambiguity from the perspective of the men's hall, might not contrarily empower the women outside, especially for the management of their own pregnancies and childbirths” (287). Such sexualized imagery is curious given its association not only with the oft underrepresented Anglo-Saxon mother, but also with characteristic warrior imagery. If an Anglo-Saxon charm borrows the highly-venerated imagery of war and militarism in its exploration of birth, then there must be a deep respect assigned to obstetric acts. By exploring these charms through the allusion of *waelcyrge*, we might expand our previous understandings of the absent Anglo-Saxon mother.

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<sup>13</sup> See Godfried Storms, Howell Chickering, or Stephen Pollington for robust scholarship on the medical components of this poem.

<sup>14</sup> Please see “For Delayed Birth” for an example of female-centric metrical charms of the same quality as this.

There seems to be, towards the end of the charm's opening, an image of the female as shield-maiden, protecting the body from the penetration of the spear/sword/phallus via the "lȳtel spere,": I am suggesting here an alternative to the traditional scholarly interpretation of this text as the *waelcyrge* as bringer of the pain. Placing the "mihtigan wīf" [mighty women] as wielder of shield and the male "smyth" as the architect of the spear, there is a clear indication of the woman as protector and the male as assailant in this piece. Such associations are furthered later in the poem when we are confronted with the image of:

syx smiðas sǣtan wælspera worhtan

ūt spere næs in spere

gif hēr inne sȳ īsenes dǣl

hægtessan geweorc hit sceal gemyltan (14-7)

[Six smiths sat and wrought slaughter-spears. Be out, not in, spears. If here is a spear of iron, it is the work of hag-witches and must melt]

Here, we have what Alaric Hall considers a representation of in-group/out-group sociological constructs, in which the mortal/human/healer in-group is set against the supernatural/harming out-group (116). While Hall's analysis is apt, one might also consider the way in which these passages are gendered, so that the female hag/witch is not only positioned against the male smith, but she exhibits a power that greatly exceeds his own. This seemingly venerates the figure of the woman as dichotomously possessing supernatural knowledge that exceeds the height of male-centric Anglo-Saxon technological advancement by way of iron smelting and swordcraft. Through its parody of penetrative sex acts through the command "be out, not in, spears," the female *waelcyrge* possesses remarkable sexual autonomy not only through her ability to verbally

command that which enters and exits her own body, but also dominion over that which enters the male body. Such imagery grants the female dominion over sex acts, as well as life and death, a radical departure from the Anglo-Saxon gender politic. This is furthered through the poem's numeric focus; it takes exactly six smiths to manufacture spears, but the unnumbered plural *haegtessan* is able to wrought spears of iron, notably stronger than the smith's spears. Due to the *haegtessan* spear's magical imbue ment, the *haegtessan*'s is able to capitalize on the same materials as the smiths, but greatly exceeds their power. The *waelcyrgan* spear can only be removed from the body via melting. One might consider the way in which this poem may represent menstruation, by which the process of "melting" or shedding one's uterine lining results in the "removal" of the iron spear causing the stitch. Furthermore, there seems to be a more positive indication of the *haegtessan* motif in the poem's conclusion, which suggests that in order to attain health, one must " flēo [?MS fled] þær on fyrgehæfde...nim þonne þæt seax ādō on wāetan" [Fly there on the mountaintop, then take the knife and put it in liquid] (26-2). The image of flight and mountaintops seems to echo the poem's opening, in which warrior-women are presented as flying over mounds. Here, the symbolic setting down of weaponry via liquidation seems to carry various medical connotations of sterilization/menstruation, but also suggests a taming of the warrior woman, who, in surrendering her sword to mythic waters, evokes Arthurian romance. Although the conclusions of this poem are enigmatic, the way in which the *waelcyrge* and imagery surrounding her is associated with the realm of everyday human anatomy is a notable departure from the Norse tradition that many scholars are all too apt to link it with. More important, this highly symbolic representation of female biological processes serves to venerate the female body in a deeply covert manner.

Another Anglo-Saxon charm, “For the Swarm of the Bees,” presents a further obscured obstetric representation of the *waelcyrge*. In this representation, the *waelcyrge*’s ferocity can exist simultaneously with benevolence and fecundity.<sup>15</sup> The charm reads:

Wið ymbe nim eorþan, oferweorp mid þinre swiþran

handa under þinum swiþran fet, and cwet:

Fo ic under fot, funde ic hit.

Hwæt, eorðe mæg wið ealra wihta gehwilce

and wið andan and wið æminde

and wið þa micelan mannes tungan.

And wiððon forweorp ofer greot, þonne hi swirman, and cweð:

Sitte ge, sigewif, sigað to eorþan!

Næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan.

Beo ge swa gemindige mines godes,

swa bið manna gehwilc metes and eþeles (1-11)

[Take up the earth with your right hand / and throw it under your right foot and say / ‘I take you under foot, I have found it / listen, earth is potent against every sort of creature / and against hatred and against forgetfulness / and against the mighty magic of men. Throw gravel over them when they swarm and say / “Settle down, seige-women, sink to earth! / Never wild to the woods fly / Be mindful of my goods / As is every person of food and home!”]

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<sup>15</sup> Of all the texts within the Anglo-Saxon corpus, this particular one seems the most relevant to study of the secondary characters in the later portions of *Beowulf*, and therefore will be important for the remainder of this paper.

Various scholars<sup>16</sup> have commented upon this charm's allusion to the *waelcyrge* as a metaphor for the bees, as a bee's stinger seems to be aptly captured in the metaphor of the *waelcyrge*'s sword. Yet, such readings minimize the importance of beekeeping to Anglo-Saxon survival, in which the bee is not merely seen as threatening due to its stinging capability, but also indispensable for the Anglo-Saxon diet, survival, and commerce. As James Spamer and, more recently, Marijane Osborn have argued, most readings of the poem erroneously read the charm as "one against swarming...[instead of] a charm to protect the swarm, which in itself is desirable" (278). Such evidence is likewise found in the poem, in which the bee is not merely a pest but an integral part in maintaining the earth, which is "potent against every other creature." The poem posits that the earth can be used to tame the swarm of bees, which seems to suggest that the marriage of both earth and its associated flora with that of the swarming insects is an evening agent, by which the excesses of both can be checked. This symbiotic relationship is not merely observational; the poem goes on to suggest that such a relationship is integral to the survival of humans, as evidenced in the poem's last line. The poem exploits the image of the *waelcyrge* through its metaphoric explanation of the bee as a *sigewif*, or siege-woman, who is commanded down from her symbolic flight in order to pollinate the earth. The command "never wild to the woods fly" is directly correlated to the food and home of the speaker, whose voice is not individualistic or collectivist in nature, but both simultaneously. The poem asks for the *waelcyrge* to de-mythologize herself, to abandon flight and "sigað to eorþan! [settle to earth]" for the betterment of humanity.

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<sup>16</sup> See Hilda Davidson Ellison, Daniel Gilmore Calder, and Stanley Greenfield.

Here, as in the other Anglo-Saxon charm, the *waelcyrge* seems to be a dichotomous figure of latency, whose existence as a figure of both life and death--of natural supernaturalism--threatens the easy categorizations that engender comfort for an Anglo-Saxon readership. That the *waelcyrge* needs to be tamed, to be brought symbolically to earth, and that her swarm need earthly suffocation, all seems to connect symbolically to the Anglo-Saxon anxieties. Primarily, these anxieties surround the cultural shifts of females within a political sphere, as peaceweavers whose obstetric commodification blended the domestic and political. As Lees demonstrates, in the several decades before political alliances emerge in England, women could wield minor political power, and even rule tribal bands (“Engendering” 22). It is no surprise that the “swarm” of sigewifs may present a troublesome mythology as her agential feminized forms of militancy directly destabilize the Anglo-Saxon comitatus, whose entire function is predicated upon the passivity of the peaceweaving female. The mythologized, militaristic female comes to symbolically represent the ability to perpetuate an unstable, distant past through the parameters of her biology, and, thus, one can understand the paradoxical veneration and anxiety that the *waelcyrge* generates in these sources.

We can come to understand a common theme throughout the totality of the twelve references of the *waelcyrge* that I have thus far reviewed: the taming or evening out of a mythic figure who seems to operate only within extremes. Scholars have spent entire careers on the way in which Anglo-Saxon culture works as one of absorption; such theoretical work almost exclusively refers to the hybridization associated with pre-Christian Germanic paganism and Roman-sponsored Christianity. Very few scholars, however, explore gender through this analysis. Although much of the Anglo-Saxon corpus is male-centric, archaeology provides us

some clues into the cultural shift happening in the fifth through eighth centuries and how such shift may have revealed the real-life women on whom the *waelcyrge* may be based. The last eight years have witnessed an explosion of archaeological findings in which women, heretofore believed to be confined to more domestic tasks or relegated to the agentially complicated role of peaceweaver, have been shown to be associated with war or battle.<sup>17</sup> According to Sir Frank Stenton, the historic dating of burial sites indicates that prior to the last quarter of the fifth century, there were no tribal or ethnic relocations for burials (1). The sporadic nature of these peoples' political allegiances seems to indicate a lack of political alliance, as no clear-cut kingdoms emerge (Yorke 9). However, in the latter portion of the sixth century, we see specific kingdoms emerge, with peoples of certain ethnic association buried in pockets of homogeneity. Such is evident not only through burial practices, but also through pottery and metal work left that demonstrates clearly delineated kingdoms (Arnold 20). The tethering of allegiance to object, notably gold and gems, indicates the type of mead-hall allegiances and the emerging comitatus that are characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon Era (Yorke 13). English tribal bands began to ally themselves under "mead-hall allegiances" under which the notion of a king or protector becomes chiefly important. The comitatus may seem to negate the previously empowered, active warrior woman, as she comes to be characteristic of a distant historical time of instability. Her taming, then, becomes associated with a hallmark of stability. She may be incorporated into the comitatus by way of peaceweaving, but her role has shifted from that of warrior to that of quiet politician. Thus, the *waelcyrge* endures in the Anglo-Saxon corpus as a kind of historic relic, relevant in affirming a symbolic other to the relative stability of the Anglo-Saxon comitatus. Yet,

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<sup>17</sup> See Jarman, C., Biddle, M., Higham, T., & Bronk Ramsey, C.'s recent publication about English burial.

her robust mythological and historical tradition serves to represent a resistance to easy binary categorizations, ones that the comitatus is predicated upon. The *waelcyrge* offers the female complexity in the place of normalizing alleged monstrous feminine behavior.

No character in *Beowulf* best exemplifies this duality than Modthryth.<sup>18</sup> Much like the metrical charms, the *Beowulf* poet never makes direct reference to the *waelcyrge* by name, but Modthryth embodies various elements on the *waelcyrge* tradition. Modthryth herself has been a bit of an enigma in *Beowulf* studies. R.M. Liuza notes the “somewhat murky story of Thryth...[which has] been regarded at one time or another as detachable parts of a composite structure, in need of explanation or apology” (26). The enigma of Modthryth’s appearance in the text is frequently explained through her functioning as a foil to the peaceweaving Hygd. Notably, Malone, through a somewhat radical reading of the original Anglo-Saxon, interprets Hygd as the “good folk-queen” and Modthryth as a figure of “arrogance and terrible wickedness” (161). Part of this tradition stems from the original Tolkien tradition, where liberties taken with the Anglo-Saxon translation establish Modthryth as a “niggard” whose “dire wickedness” sets her apart from the ideal queen who “should weave men’s peace” (1618, 1621, 1629). Tolkien’s translation and subsequent scholarship surrounding Modthryth (and other heroic females) has colored the greater part of the century’s notion of the one-dimensionality of the Anglo-Saxon female. The privileging here of the false-duality of passive femininity and active masculinity neglects the liminality of the *waelcyrge*, a figure directly evoked through Modthryth.

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<sup>18</sup> Much debate has been made about Modthryth’s actual name, with some scholars using Modthryth, Thryth, or Fremu as solutions to the lacunas in the Nowell Codex. For simplicity’s sake, I have settled on Modthryth. Using this name in no way privileges one name over the other; I must confess my novice level understanding of this great translation debate here.



I am suggesting here a mode of reading Modthryth that focuses not on wickedness nor of her deviance from the traditional Anglo-Saxon gender dichotomy but rather as a more complex character whose complexity is established by allusion to the *waelcyrge* tradition. By exploring this figure within the context of the *waelcyrge*, we can better appreciate her assimilation from a warrior-based culture to that of the political mead-hall alliances of the *comitatus*. Through this work of historical context, we can come to understand her not as a figure whose militaristic cunning, female biology, and supernatural allusions serve to engender her as an exemplary figure for the emergent political structure of her time. Her resistance to these easy gender-based categorizations is not judged by the poetic voice of the poem, but, rather, is celebrated. The anxieties she flirts with can be de-emphasized through a *waelcyrge* context.

One of the primary anxieties surrounding Modthryth is her seemingly indiscriminate violence. We are told that:

Mōd þrȳðo wæg,  
 fremu folces cwēn firen' ondrysne;  
 nānig þæt dorste dēor genēþan  
 swāesra gesīða, nefne sinfrea,  
 þæt hire an dæges ēagum starede;  
 ac him wælbende weotode tealde  
 handgewriþene; hraþe seoþðan wæs  
 æfter mundgripe mēce geþinged,  
 þæt hit sceādenmæl scȳran mōste,  
 cwealmbealu cȳðan. Ne bið swylc cwēnlīc þēaw

idese tō efnanne, þēah ðe hīo ænlicu sȳ,  
 þætte freoðuwebbe fēores onsāce  
 æfter ligetorne lēofne mannan. (1931-43)

[(Hygd considered) Modthryth's motion, / famous folk-queen and her venerated  
 transgressions: / no man, however bold, with her own kinsman / dared approach  
 her, except as her father, / or dared to look her in the eyes / they knew that deadly  
 bonds, wrought by hand / were awaiting him. First the braided hilt and soon after  
 a blade / so that a patterned sword had to settle things, / determine execution. That  
 is no queenly custom / for a woman to perform--no matter how beautiful--that a  
 peaceweaver should claim the life of a dear man after a feigned slight]

A great many scholars<sup>19</sup> have considered Modthryth a figure of monstrous femininity, given her wanton slaughter of suitors. But, few if any scholars comment upon the utter lack of suitability of these suitors given their poor presentation in battle. That Modthryth is able to best them in battle suggests a kind of crisis of masculinity, by which the hopeful male is a poor marital companion and an utterly inadequate member of the *comitatus* given his poor fighting skill. Modthryth's ability to best them in battle suggests that these males are not only inadequate suitors, but, also threats to the security and stability of the *comitatus*. Modthryth then, by way of embodying the *waelcyrge*, is not indiscriminate in her selection of who lives and dies, but, rather, operates under a kind of proto-Darwinian principle, weeding out those who would not make a proper allegiance for her. Thus, her violence is a kind of purgation for the sake of her tribe's survival, while systematically ensuring her own personal wellbeing. Much like the *waelcyrge* tradition of the

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<sup>19</sup> See Jane C. Nitzsche, Francis Leneghan, and Andy Orchard's *Critical Companion To Beowulf* as examples.

Anglo-Saxon glosses and the metrical charms, female perpetrated violence serves a pragmatic, utilitarian purpose that ensures tribal survival. Likewise, if we contextualize the marriage act as one that has historic significance regarding political allegiances and intertribal peace treatise, one can understand Modthryth's exclusion of these suitors not as vanity, but as one that serves a sociopolitical function.

Although the poem clearly critiques certain elements of Modthryth's actions, namely in its use of the phrase "Ne bið swylc cwēnlīc þēaw" [that was no queenly custom], one might read this not as an indictment of Modthryth's gendered behavior, but, rather, as a discordance between her status as a warrior and her eventual role as queen via her marriage to Offa. One might read this, instead, as an acknowledgement that Modthryth's actions in actively picking a suitor do not align with contemporary notions of a peaceweaving queen, rather than the poem itself making an outright judgment to the acceptability of her behavior. The Modthryth-digression-as-critique reading stems from various translators, including R.M. Liuzá's own avowedly feminist translation, narrowly translating the word *waeg* as one associated with negative judgment. As the first word in the text after Modthryth's name and as one of grammatical possession, this word sways a reader's entire understanding of the passage. Most Anglo-Saxon scholars read this word as Modthryth's "wickedness," "evil," "arrogance," or "pride."<sup>20</sup> Given the great change Modthryth undergoes, one might instead seek a translation that passes less moral judgment.<sup>21</sup> I would like to suggest that the opening line, "Mōd þrýðo wæg"

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<sup>20</sup> See the Tolkien, Chickering, Klaeber, Heaney translations of 1931 as examples.

<sup>21</sup> There are other examples of mistranslation coloring a misreading of Modthryth. For example, the phrase "*firen' ondrysne*" is similarly translated with negative connotation, though the gamut of these words is profound, meaning everything from sin/crime to torment or suffering. One can see how the tonal implications of such vast translation options deeply impacts our understanding of Modthryth as a figure worthy of pity or worthy of indictment. All of this serves to blur and obscure a single, one-dimensional reading of Modthryth, whose violence, through these

suggests a highly-symbolic, deeply de-categorized natural image. *Waeg* is frequently used throughout the Anglo-Saxon corpus as a metaphor for the sea, frequently translating to “motion” or “billowing.” *Waeg* in and of itself suggests a resistance of static categorization. This metaphoric ebb and flow coincides with the metamorphosis Modthryth undergoes as she goes from militantly single to happily married. Like other *waelcyrge* texts, feminine images of nature and its taming function didactically, highlighting the integral nature of femininity to tribal survival, as evidenced in “For a Swarm of Bees.” Modthryth’s *waeg* metaphorically provides insight into her dual nature; as queen, she can ensure the survival or destruction of her tribe. Again, we see the poem’s resistance towards interpreting one modality of feminine behavior. Modthryth’s connection to the sea illuminates a dual nature in the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition,<sup>22</sup> as the sea represents both the life-giving maternity of mythological females while also functioning as a barren wasteland of exile given nonconformity to the comitatus. Binding Modthryth figuratively with the sea serves to connect her metonymically to the duality established in the *waelcyrge* tradition. Much like the bees in “For a Swarm,” the sea (Modthryth’s change) functions as something that is perilous yet simultaneously necessary for survival, as is evidenced by the poem’s final representation of Modthryth as a mythic mother to Mercian dynasties. It is no surprise, then, that, in order to find her happy marriage, Modthryth must travel across the sea to meet Offa. Her violence, much like her journey across the sea, are necessary not only for her tribe’s survival, but also as a reference point for other queens, as we see with Hygd.

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readings, becomes less predatory and more utilitarian, especially as it solidifies the success of her heirs in the divergence’s conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> See “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” for exemplars in this tradition.

The purposefulness of her violence aside, Modthryth's association with physical objects furthers her association with the *waelcyrge* and, simultaneously, blurs the lines between the masculine and feminine. There is an undeniable mythic quality evoked by the poem in the description of "braided hilt," the "patterned sword" "wrought by hands." Furthermore, her use of swords aligns her more with the warrior in the comitatus than the peaceweaver. The use of piecemeal representations of fragments of swords in a building of tension towards the execution of the suitors serves to intensify the dramatic stasis of this moment while systematically emphasizing the relationship between Modthryth and her sword. That the hilt is patterned or braided serves to pun upon the poem's previous feminine representations, namely through Wealhþēow, who is described as having both patterned garments and braided hair. The allusion of braiding marries feminine handicrafts with militaristic work, serving symbolically to blur the lines between activities considered exclusively domestic (i.e. braiding and bodily adornment) and exclusively masculine (smithing and swordcraft). The subversion here increases our understanding of Modthryth as a figure of brute force and military cunning who, like the *waelcyrge*, utilizes weapons not merely in arbiting life and death but, also, in venerating her own power and skill. Considering the great political and genealogical connotations of swords as a mechanism for underscoring the might and power of the comitatus throughout the earlier sections of the poem<sup>23</sup>, we can see a political angle in Modthryth's representation. Although Modthryth's sword carries no name, it serves to distance her from the "*cwēnlīc*" tradition of peaceweaving by increasing her agency and mythic prowess. Like the Anglo-Saxon metrical charm "For a Stitch" which seemingly links the technology of smelted metal with feminine

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<sup>23</sup> See Hrunthing as a primary example of this, and, later, Grendel's mother's destruction of it.

gynecological experiences, so too does Modthryth's use of swords. Through her wielding of a weapon that carries the connotation of political allegiance and masculine power, Modthryth is able to be discriminant in her choice of a suitable husband, making her far more agential than the traditional peaceweaving female. Thus, the sword comes to represent *waelcyrgan* female agency rather than oppressive subservience.

Furthermore, Modthryth's violence comes as a direct consequence of a perpetuation of the male gaze, much like the mirabilis tradition of the *waelcyrge*. The Modthryth digression makes various references to eyes, much as the *waelcyrginc* of *Wonders of the East*. However, *Beowulf* elects to invert the inversion of *Wonders*, granting the multiple eyes to the disruptive gaze of the male suitors. The poem elects to grant Modthryth agency by interrupting the male gaze through violent intervention. Much has been made of the use of the word "*sinfrea*" as the person who is allowed to gaze at Modthryth, with most scholars<sup>24</sup> landing on interpreting the line as no man being permitted to gaze upon Modthryth other than her father, eliciting a kind of outright refusal of Modthryth to participate in the marital bartering customary for peaceweavers. Should we accept this translation, Modthryth's slaughtering of the suitors becomes not merely a rejection of the passive femininity hallmarked by other Anglo-Saxon sources, but also an overt protest. Her rejection of the suitors literally and figuratively combats the commodification of marriage the *comitatus* became noted for, as it evolved into an increasingly complex web of intertribal commerce solidified through the bartering of peaceweavers. However, the word *sinfrea* can also be translated as husband, or beloved, which may, on the surface, seem a precarious translation given Modthryth's marriage to Offa later in the poem. Such variance could

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<sup>24</sup> See the Liuza, Tolkien, Chickering, Klaeber, Heaney translations.

further deepen our understanding of Modthryth's rejection and slaughter of the suitors as being motivated not from sheer rage, but rather due to her potential status as a spurned lover, widow, or participant in a forbidden romance. While I am not attempting to suggest any one of these readings as authoritative, I am suggesting that an expansive understanding of translational variance of *sinfrea* aids us in resisting a one-dimensional understanding of Modthryth. Any one of these translations adds depth to Modthryth, forcing us to acknowledge her as a being with personal, complex motivations. Regardless of Modthryth's motivation, her bold rejection of her status as an object to be gazed upon serves to increase her agency within the poem while systematically problematizing the role of a queen who resists the cultural shift towards comitatus. Similarly, the *waelcyrge* of *Wonders of the East* sought to present the tragedy of feminine exploitation at the hands of men whereas Modthryth's narrative functions as an antidote to the power imbalance already emergent in marriage customs in the Anglo-Saxon comitatus. Likewise, it is not merely the male gaze itself that is punished, but the entitlement to such a gaze on behalf of the suitors. One can assume the predatory nature of the suitors' gazes, given the comparison to other, more permissible gazes they are compared to. The reactionary nature of Modthryth's violence seems to question the wanton nature of her violence and, instead, establishes her violence as reactionary and prophylactic in nature. Both Modthryth and the females of *Wonders* participate in a reacclimation of feminine bodily autonomy as rendered symbolically through their observation by way of the male gaze. The Nowell Codex is replete with other examples<sup>25</sup> of the predatory male gaze, making Modthryth's rejection of the gaze particularly justified. Given the male gaze's erotic nature, as borrowed from the Hellenistic

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<sup>25</sup> See *Judith* for further examples. Consider lines 45-60, in which Holofernes gazes at Judith, especially 57-60, in which "The famous prince / became blissful then; he thought of the bright maid, / to defile with impurity and disgrace." Translation by Mary Savelli. Like Modthryth, Judith punishes this predatory gaze with execution.

sources it originates from, one can understand the subtle work these moments of feminine violence contribute to undoing the image of a passive female subject. Much like the *waelcyrge* of the Anglo-Saxon metrical charms, Modthryth, for all her glorious and epic construction, vehemently rejects participation in the female-as-spectacle motif of peaceweaving. Thus, it is particularly apt that the suitor she finally comes to accept, Offa, is one who lies across the vast sea, as he never has an opportunity to reduce her via gaze. Modthryth's *waeg* again becomes particularly relevant.

In fact, Modthryth's marriage to Offa has been cited as one of the most problematic aspects of her story arc, particularly for feminist scholars who view her as a character of admirable agency who is ultimately bought by jewels and forced into marital submission. However, to argue her inevitable marriage and the reception of jewels are hallmarks of submission is to ignore the *waelcyrge* imagery evoked in this moment. Her ultimate allegiance to Offa and her adornment in glittering jewels need not be exclusionary nor antithetical to her status as warrior. We are told that Modthryth causes "læs gefremede" [less wickedness/strife] once she is "gyfen goldhroden geongum cempan" [given gold-adorned to the young companion] (1946, 1948). On the surface, this may seem like a Jane Eyreian nightmare, where a female figure is tempted into submission by way of feminine adornment. However, the extent of Modthryth's lack of violence may not be directly correlated to the presence of gold, especially given her traveling over the sea to Offa's court, which effectively removes her from the predatory gaze of her suitors. Adornment in gold historically was not strictly gendered, and, often, was the hallmark of male warrior prowess. Elsewhere, the Anglo-Saxon corpus<sup>26</sup> illuminates the martial

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<sup>26</sup> See the elegiac poems, namely "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" for exemplars of this trope.



nature of gold-adornment through the trope of the *goldwine*, or goldfriend. In fact, given the politic of the comitatus, the individual adorned with gold may in fact be the most militaristically gifted, the king's most trusted and competent ally.

Thus, with Modthryth's adornment, we need not box her into the realm of wife and spectacle; her status as *goldhroden* does not dilute her militaristic might, but, rather, illuminates it. Furthermore, her status as *goldhroden* serves to exemplify her mythic connection to the *waelcyrge* as well. As Damico points out in a discussion of the word *goldhroden* in conjunction with her *Wealhþēow* as valkyrie argument, "the semantic resonances of *goldhroden* distantly suggest that *Wealhtheow* was conceived in the tradition of Nordic warrior-woman...the possibility that -hroden sometimes possesses a dual sense of 'stained with blood' and 'adorned' likewise indicates a martial identity for the queen" (*Wealhtheow* 84). One may logically extend this argument to Modthryth as well, who, unlike *Wealhþēow*, has demonstrated extensive prowess in hand-to-hand combat within the poetic action of the poem. Being *goldhroden* also functions as a kind of double-entendre in its evocation of battle blood, particularly when applied to a female figure, as it evokes not only blood spilled in battle but also menstrual blood. Given that Modthryth functions as a poetic antecedent to Hygd, who, herself is described as "swīðe geong" [very young], the punning of menstrual blood becomes particularly noteworthy, especially in its political undertone (1926). Modthryth's fertility is important not only in solidifying her marriageability but also in solidifying the comitatus's interaction with patrilineality the poem comments upon. Thus, being *goldhroden* may function both maritally and martially, expanding readings of Modthryth predicated on one-dimensionality.

The coupling of Offa and Modthryth and their subsequent lineage results in many great returns for Offa and his *comitatus*, politically and mythically. Modthryth is seemingly reformed, or, potentially more at home with Offa's *comitatus*, wherein her seat upon the "gumstōle" [throne] brings "gōde mære, / līfgesceafta" [good fortune, living conditions/fate] (1952-3). The connection here is palpable; Modthryth's presence in this kingdom is in direct correlation with a high quality of living. Given Modthryth's tactile cunning and skill in battle, it is not unreasonable to assume that the combined military prowess of Modthryth and Offa creates the level of peace and security enjoyed by Offa's people. This seems to harken back to "Modthryth's *waeg*" [Modthryth's motion] in the beginning of the divergence,<sup>27</sup> which supports a translation that avoids negative judgment for Modthryth's actions. It is not that she is evil or wicked, but that her movement from her father's *comitatus* to Offa's enables her to participate in social mores and folkways more akin to her skillset. This is made even further apparent, when we are told that their union is "þ[one] sēlestan bī sām twēonum" [the best between two seas] (1966), which, again, given Modthryth's *waeg* seems to indicate the might of her newfound kingdom exceeds that of her father. This noteworthy success, marked by a twofold (*twēonum*) presence of military cunning seems to mark Modthryth's atypical feminine behavior as an asset, rather than a liability.

After this litany of praise for Modthryth, the poem makes a notable shift towards genealogy, first noting:

forðām Offa wæs

geofum ond gūðum, gārcēne man

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<sup>27</sup> Here, I mean in the beginning of the so-called Offa-divergence, a term applied by scholars to make sense of the long discussion of Modthryth here, given that she seemingly does not contribute to the narrative structure of *Beowulf*.

wīde geweorðod, wīsdōme hēold

ēðel sīnne

[therefore Offa was in treasures and war spear-bold man, who was widely honored and held in wisdom in all lands] (1957-8).

The word *forðām* [consequently, therefore] is of particular importance here, as it indicates that the subsequent praise of Offa is a direct consequence of Modthryth's presence, further proving the causal relationship between this tribal connectedness and her warlike prowess. Furthermore, because this passage goes on to list a great many military and economic hallmarks, one must value Modthryth not merely as her function as a peaceweaver, but, also as her function as a military, political ally. Much like the *waelcyrge* who grant favor in battle, Modthryth's presence and good favor of Offa serve to increase their military domination and therefore yield greater conquest of land and goods. Like the *waelcyrge* traditions who predate her, Modthryth resists easy categorization into a passive/monstrous female binary. This serves to solidify Modthryth's endurance as a *fremu folces cwēn* while systematically linking her to the mythic and eternal nature of this tribe by way of her ability to give birth.

We are given a list of heroes birthed out of Modthryth and Offa's union, namely Eomer, Hemming, and Garmund, all of whom are "nīða cræftig" [violently powerful] (1961). The genealogical listing here serves a dual purpose. Primarily, it serves to venerate the success of the Modthryth-Offa partnership, as their successful marriage is marked by progeny. However, its dual purpose provides a kind of proto-genetic framework, by which the coupling of two ferocious militaristic figures ensures a bloodline of equal prowess. The inherent success of Modthryth's partnership, for some, such as Dockray-Miller, likens Modthryth's heroism here

with that of Beowulf, who “though female, is ultimately masculine since she wields her power the same way Beowulf does” namely through the marriage of judicious killing and political cunning (31). Many scholars, most recently, Francis Leneghan, have linked this particular divergence in *Beowulf* as performing a kind of propaganda for the court of Offa II, whose Mercian roots would benefit from such a mythic link (541). One cannot help but note that such propaganda and success comes not from the hands of Offa I, but, rather, through his link to a supposed problematic female.

Less overt in alleged problematic femininity is Hygd whose problematic nature stems not from atypical gendered behavior but rather her seemingly pathological passivity. Often cited<sup>28</sup> as an archetype for the passive peaceweaving Anglo-Saxon female, Hygd seems to resist the passivity of Modthryth through her recollection of Modthryth’s *wæg* [motion]. The motion Modthryth seems to undergo frames the remainder of Hygd’s action within the poem as one who, likewise, incorporates the imagery and spirit of the *waelcyrge* as a dominant framework for feminine discourse. Although scholars<sup>29</sup> have focused on the validity of Modthryth’s *waeg* as a cautionary tale that wards off Hygd from deviant, monstrous behavior, the way in which both women function as an allusion to the *waelcyrge* serves to position these women not as foils but as mirror images of the same mythological construct--a construct that speaks against Hygd’s passivity.

The first images we receive of Hygd within the poem are highly symbolic, positioning her within the “*Bold wæs betlic*” [grand/splendid hall]. Associating Hygd with the splendor of the hall covertly establishes Hygd as a link to the military power the mead-hall represents. One

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<sup>28</sup>See Carol Jamison Parrish.

<sup>29</sup> See Eliason and Moore as an example of this reading. See Mary Dockray-Miller’s “The Masculine Queen of Beowulf”. *Women and Language*, 1998 for a survey of this trend and for a wonderful critique of it.

must consider the historical context of the mead hall, which represents not a domestic sphere but, rather, the culmination of military conquest and political allegiances. As Stephen Pollington notes, the mead hall is greatly symbolic of “negotiations and discourse..the hall became the appropriate display of power, both secular and religious. Power was visible through ritual; through the deference of others in power, through the careful use of rich display” (*Mead Hall* 114). Hygd’s role in perpetuating the symbolism of the mead-hall is increased due to her biology, which the poem also immediately qualifies in its referral to her as “swīðe geong” [very young]. The biological connotations associated with having a very young queen are significant, as this qualifier certainly reminds the reader/listener that this is a fertile individual, capable of birthing progeny that will perpetuate the mead-hall alliance and, eventually, transition into a type of patrilineality. Such imagery is furthered by the symbolic reference to winter that also tethers Hygd to the mead-hall, in which we are told that “þēah ðe wintra lýt / under burhlocan gebiden hæbbe, / Hæreþes dohtor; næs hīo hnāh swā þēah, / nē tō gnēað gifā Gēata lēodum, māþmgestrēona” [although few winters had passed with the daughter of Hæreth passed inside the mead-halls walls] (1927-31). Hygd’s status as a figure of fertility here marries her to the dominant figure of the *waelcyrge* in the Anglo-Saxon glosses, whose duality as both fertile and ferocious functions as a fundamental part of her being. Winter here becomes symbolically coded as fertility and militaristic simultaneously embodied through Hygd.

In order to fully understand this symbol, we must explore its robust presence throughout Anglo-Saxon poetry; winter almost always carries connotations of absent fertility and isolation from the comitatus. The trope of winter in Anglo-Saxon poetics is well-documented, and, almost always, draws inspiration from isolation. “The Wanderer” represents an exemplar of this

phenomenon, in which the “*hrimcealde sæ / wadan wræclastas*” [on the ice-cold sea, walks the paths of exile] (4a-b). The perpetuation of this trope throughout the Anglo-Saxon corpus immediately codes Hygd as a political figure, symbolically insulated inside the mead-hall walls. The marriage of these two interpretations of Hygd as antithetical to winter, both as representing fertility and political or militaristic cunning, serves to underscore her connection to the *waelcyrge*. Much like in the metrical poem “For the Swarm of the Bees,” Hygd’s natural association functions as a kind of metaphor for militaristic and political cunning, as the poem proves in Hygd’s strategic allegiance with Beowulf as a mechanism of defending her son’s precarious political position. In both the Anglo-Saxon metrical poems and Hygd’s opening moments, we see a figure of great political and militaristic cunning temper herself in order to ensure greater good for humanity, in this case the survival and succession of the Geats through denying her own son’s succession to the throne.

It is this act of resistance towards patrilineal succession that positions Hygd as antithetical to the traditional domestic readings of the character. Although the initial link to Hæreth forces Hygd into the role of peaceweaver, such allegiance does not serve to reduce her autonomy in fomenting her as a traditional peaceweaver. Similarly, her love and protection for Heardrēde seems to color her in the realm of a maternal protectress. Yet, for all the work the poem does to align Hygd with patrilineality and maternalism, her fundamental actions resist this phenomenon and, instead, align her with the *comitatus* and warrior-based allegiances separate from mere genealogical succession. Instead, Hygd’s rejection of genealogical succession in favor of Beowulf’s ascension to the Geatish throne serves to underscore her extreme military cunning. The poem gives us insight into Hygd’s inner thoughts in this political deference to

Beowulf as king. Hygd “bearne ne trūwode, / þæt hē wið ælfylcum ēþelstōlas / healdan cūðe, ðā wæs Hygelāc dēad” [she did not trust that he [Heardrēde] could hold the ancestral throne against foreign invaders now that Hygelac was dead] (2370-2). Although many scholars interpret this moment as an act of maternal sacrifice for her son, one must carefully note the poem’s decision to focus on martial phrases such as “ælfylcum” and “ēþelstōlas.” The use of the word *ælfylcum* specifically references foreign invaders, which serves to underscore not only Hygd’s objective evaluation of her son’s abilities, but also grants her great understanding of the militaristic threats to the Geatish people abroad. Furthermore, her rejection of patrilineality is marked through the use of “ēþelstōlas,” which carries various paternalistic connotations. Much like the *waelcyrge* tradition of the metrical charm “For a Stitch” and the Anglo-Saxon glosses, Hygd operates in the *waelcyrge* mode of chooser, whose understated guidance shapes the fate of a geographic or ethnic people. To this end, she also utilizes her son, a clear hallmark of Hygd’s maternal status, with the realm of politics, much as the metrical charms liken obstetric imagery with the militaristic. Hygd’s status as protector through political and militaristic intervention is apt, considering her selection of Beowulf as Hygelac’s successor proves beneficial to the Geatish people, though not necessarily her own bloodline, given Heardrēde’s later death in combat. Given the poem’s tremendous effort in establishing Beowulf as an ultimate hero, one who will ultimately come to their defense in his old age against the dragon, it seems that Hygd chooses wisely in abandoning the patrilineal succession in favor of a more militaristic political model that favors prowess in battle over genealogical justification.

Hygd’s interactions with Beowulf further solidify her status as an allusion to the *waelcyrge* in her receiving of Wealhtheow’s necklace. Much like Modthryth’s jewels, this

tremendous gift functions as a kind of solidification of her status as *waelcyrge*. The poem tells us:

Hȳrde ic þæt hē þone healsbēah Hygde gesealde,  
 wrætlicne wundurmāððum, ðone þe him Wealhðēo  
 geaf,  
 ðēod(nes) dohtor, þrīo wicg somod  
 swancor ond sadolbeorht; hyre syððan wæs  
 æfter bēahðege br[ē]ost geweorðod. (2172-6)

[I have heard that he (Beowulf) had given the necklace to Hygd, the beautiful, wondrous treasure that Wealhtheow had given him, to his lord's daughter, along with three horses, graceful and saddle-bright. Her breast was decorated more thankfully after that ring-giving]

The mere act of gift-giving from Beowulf's travels abroad in Heorot serves to elevate Hygd's status within the role of the *comitatus*, again establishing her relationship with Beowulf as characteristic of the *goldwine*, in which the exchange of goods represents overt political favor based on military might and political acquisitions--a fact later underscored by Hygd's naming of Beowulf as Hygelac's heir. Furthermore, that this is Wealhtheow's necklace is of particular importance. First, as Helen Damico and Richard North both have observed, the necklace, *Brosinga mene*, may be a corruption of the Norse *brisingamen*, Freya's necklace, which would symbolically link Wealhtheow and, by association, Hygd, to the Norse *Valkyrie* tradition (178, 194). However, the necklace performs a kind of dual role in fomenting a kind of intertribal diplomacy while simultaneously carrying local political importance for each *comitatus* who



inhabits it. For Wealhtheow, the necklace ultimately solidifies her role as a patrilineal figure, in that giving Beowulf the necklace protects her own progeny's right to Hrothgar's throne. Unlike Wealhtheow, Hygd accepts the necklace in a reversal of affirmation of her son and, instead, solidifies Beowulf's ascension to the throne. The necklace, then, comes to represent the polarity of patrilineality and military ascension, as it secures and obliterates genealogical ascension. The necklace, then, becomes symbolically linked to the *waelcyrge*, who chooses the slain and victorious in battle. It is the power of choice, rather than a hallmark of a particular political modality.

Like the gamut of positive and negative portrayals of the *waelcyrge* in the Anglo-Saxon corpus, notably in "For the Swarm of Bees," "For a Stitch," and the Wulfstan sermons, the representation of Hygd as a figure assimilated or tamed through the gift of the necklace is apparent through the use of the term *sadolbeorht*. The "saddle-bright" horses gifted to Hygd function as a direct parallel to her. The usage of this kenning functions as a kind of philosophical musing on the power of the comitatus to combat the unencumbered chaos of the natural world--a didacticism also deeply imbued in the Anglo-Saxon *waelcyrge*. Just like the horse, whose bright and adorned saddle functions as a mechanism of taming, so too does the necklace serve to solidify Hygd's status as an integral component in the comitatus. Much like the bees in the Anglo-Saxon charms, the frenetic energy and chaotic nature of these bees can be tamed in order to secure the functionality and security of a warrior tribe in the midst of their transition into a more stable politics. Much like these highly symbolic animals, Hygd operates within a comitatus modality by utilizing rhetorical cunning and military strategy to elect Beowulf as Hygelac's successor, again proving a metaphoric link between literal adornment and the intellectual

cunning necessary for a tribe's survival. Of course, Hygd's status as a queen makes her even more powerful in shaping the tribe's future identity, especially given her ability to create heirs<sup>30</sup>. This maternal propensity does not weaken her agency, as the poem's final image of Hygd is a synecdoche--Hygd herself does not appear, but her bejeweled breast does. The poem's statement is "æfter bēahðege br[ē]ost geweorðod" [her breast was more decorated after the ring-giving]. The image of the breast does dual work here, underscoring both her femininity and her warlike status, as the gold adornment is not merely decorative in function but alludes to battle armor as well as the protection and prowess of the comitatus. Hygd, then, transitions in function, becoming not only a hallmark of her individual success in assimilating to Geatish folkways, but also as a mythologized emblem of feminine power within the comitatus. This seems to coincide with a kind of generational obscuring, wherein the symbolism associated with the *waelcyrge* becomes more obscured as females are more removed from the original source material. This may explain the difference between Modthryth figuring of the *waelcyrge* being slightly more direct than that of Hygd.

When read together, Modthryth and Hygd share commonality in their seeming one-dimensionality. However, through the *waelcyrge* tradition, we can come to understand the gamut of feminine experience these figures represent. It is no surprise, then, that the text presents them together--both women exist as minor characters in the larger *Beowulf* narrative and yet offer profound insight into the integral role females played in the eleventh century politic. Through representations of militaristic, obstetric, domestic, and natural symbols, these women seem to be the culmination of the other *waelcyrge* sources. As the only females within the epic

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<sup>30</sup> This is particularly apt given the intense focus the poem has on Hygd's youth. Unlike Wealhtheow, whose marriage to the aged and ineffectual Hrothgar seems mismatched but whose fertility wanes in direct correlation with Hrothgar's agedness, Hygd is still in the height of youth and fertility at the moment of Hygelac's death.

tradition, they function as highly didactic measures of female experience. This is especially true given the oral nature of epic; it is no understatement to say that of all the *waelcyrge* texts, *Beowulf* is the one that would have reached the widest Anglo-Saxon audience. Modthryth and Hygd are not cautionary tales against female deviance that uphold the passivity of peaceweaving--they are the goldstandard for a breadth of feminine experience that cannot be easily categorized or contained in singular, one-dimensional constructs.

All too frequently, Anglo-Saxon epic is considered a genre populated by archetypal masculine behavior, in which warfare, statecraft, and heroism is coded as the domain of men. Such biases towards Anglo-Saxon epic exist within the dominant popular cultural assumptions of tribal England and its literature, and it pervades even the most recent scholarship surrounding Anglo-Saxon gender identity. The absent or colorless Anglo-Saxon female has frequently been associated with gentle, passive peaceweaving. However, the mythology of the *waelcyrge* challenges this function. Often thought of as a mythological loan from Norse literature, the *waelcyrge* emerges as a rich and complex mythological figure suggestive of tribal England's complex and complicated view of the female's role in an increasingly complex political system. As the Anglo-Saxon corpus demonstrates, particularly in the problematic heroines in the *Beowulf* manuscript, the *waelcyrge* functions as an important vehicle for commentary on anxieties associated with shifting political systems. The complex, highly symbolic nature of these mythologies as they incorporate themselves into the Anglo-Saxon zeitgeist defeats one-dimensional readings and, instead like the female characters inspired by the *waelcyrge*, gives birth to complexity and ambiguity. Although my survey of the *waelcyrge* through the Anglo-Saxon sources is restricted mainly to the problematic females in *Beowulf*, one might

further consider the way in which the *waelcyrge* may inform further analysis of other Anglo-Saxon epic heroines, especially those who are deemed problematic. Much like the real females who inspired them, epic heroines dwell within ambiguity, marrying the various, complicated, messy realities of the human experience. And, just like the *waelcyrge*, feminine experience need not be relegated to the realm of either/or, but, instead, can represent the amalgamation of various, seemingly discordant experiences.

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