BEOWULF'S MISSING MOTHER:

BEOWULF'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY, WOMEN, AND HIS OWN GENDER

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The various roles, successes, and failures of the mothers in *Beowulf* have been discussed at length, particularly as they relate to gender and politics. But there's an elephant in the room. The mother who is left out of all these discussions—and who is almost completely left out of the poem itself—is Beowulf's mother. Scholars have entirely ignored the issue of Beowulf's missing mother. Indeed, it is difficult to elaborate upon a character about whom there is so little information without traipsing into the messy territory of speculation—which probably accounts for most scholars' hesitance to venture into the matter. Her looming absence, however, does not have to be explained in order for its significance to the poem and to Beowulf himself to be recognized. Beowulf has complex attitudes regarding family, women, and his own gender expression, and these issues can all potentially be attributed back to his lack of a mother.

In numerous ways throughout the poem, Beowulf rejects the idea of family and actively chooses not to be personally involved with a family unit. One overt rejection of the family is his slaying of the monster family unit, Grendel and Grendel's mother, Grendel's mother being the second unnamed mother in the poem. But his statements come in subtler fashions as well, such as in his rejection of Hygd's offer of the throne. The most important rejection of the family comes with Beowulf's decision not to get married or have children. In this particular denial, Beowulf does not turn any woman into a

mother by impregnating her, and he also eliminates the need for a female counterpart by personally taking on the political role in which such a counterpart would function. Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother and his embodiment of female roles bring into question his gender and masculinity, and he can ultimately be viewed as an androgynous character.

The five identified mothers of *Beowulf*—Modthryth, Grendel's mother, Hildeburh, Hygd, and Wealhtheow—serve both plot-level and thematic purposes. Grendel's mother is the most prominent of these figures (although she is unnamed, ironically) because of her battle with Beowulf and its implications. Hygd and Wealhtheow are both queens and faithfully fulfill their social and political duties, and they both have sons. Wealhtheow, notably, influences Beowulf, and she is the only woman in the poem with dialogue. Modthryth and Hildeburh are also queens, but they appear only in peripheral stories that serve as thematic bolsters to the poem's meanings. Mary Dockray-Miller says that "the mothers of *Beowulf* engage in a number of performances, most designed to mother their children…they desire to protect, nurture, and teach their children."[1] Dockray-Miller goes on to argue that Wealhtheow is the only one in the poem who succeeds as a mother,[2] based on the criteria listed above. This argument, however, relies upon Dockray-Miller's distinct and controversial interpretation of the text which states that Wealhtheow, in one of her famous speeches, does not defend her sons' right to rule the kingdom, but suggests her nephew Hrothulf should be king instead of either of her sons. Though it could be a perilous political strategy, Wealhtheow's intention would be to protect her sons from danger by keeping them from ascending to the throne.[3]

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[1] Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Mothers of Beowulf," *Motherhood and Mothering in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 77-8.

[2] Dockray-Miller, 78.

[3] Dockray-Miller, 111.

Whether or not one accepts this particular aspect of Dockray-Miller's reading, it is clear that Beowulf is a critical figure in the successes and failures of the main plot's three mothers. In her attempt to keep her son from the throne, Hygd offers Beowulf the kingship. Wealhtheow recruits Beowulf to be an ally to her sons and nephew in the future when she and her husband are gone. Finally, Beowulf is the one who renders Grendel's mother a failure by killing her son, whom she fails to protect. Beowulf is deeply intertwined with the affairs of the mothers of the poem, but he has no involvement with or interest in his own mother, and Beowulf's mother is not present to fulfill her duties as a mother.

The only mention of Beowulf's mother comes from Hrothgar after Beowulf slays Grendel:

> Lo, what woman could say,
> whosoever has borne such a son
> into the race of men, if she still lives,
> that the God of Old was good to her
> in childbearing.[4] (*Beowulf* lines 942-6)

This remark indicates that at least Hrothgar does not know who Beowulf's mother is, and the statement is one full of uncertainty and questions. Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, was a legendary man, and there is no obvious reason why his wife should be unknown or unnamed, or why it should be a mystery as to whether she is alive or not. The poem places a substantial emphasis on lineage and marital relationships—characters are often even identified by their familial relationships, as when Beowulf is referred to as "son of Ecgtheow." So, while Beowulf's mother is not a present force in the poem, it is plausible to imagine her name being mentioned in the context of Beowulf's family identity. But, as Dockray-Miller points out, the

[4] *Beowulf*, trans. and ed. R.M. Liuzza (Broadview Editions, 2013): lines 942-6.

poem neglects matrilineage more than once. Hygelac, for example, has a daughter (who is unnamed in the poem), and Hygd is never directly identified as being her mother—"the unnamed daughter is called only Hygelac's in the text."[5] In his article "Names in Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon English," Tom Shippey points out that *Beowulf* contains roughly seventy Old English "personal names" (60).[6] There is a plethora of peripheral, unimportant characters whom the poet bothered to name, so why not the hero's mother? A pattern begins to emerge, though, when Grendel's mother, Hygelac's daughter, and Beowulf's mother are considered together. The poet seems to neglect matrilineage and female family members to the point of neglecting to name them in these three cases. Dockray-Miller goes so far as to say that "the mothers who populate Old English poetry reveal the metaphorical propensities of texts that try to make them disappear after they reproduce, to 'occlude' their maternity."[7] Beowulf's unnamed mother, about whom it is not known if she is alive or dead, is certainly an extreme case of occluded maternity due to the glaring lack of information given about her.

Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother must be examined closely, because this is Beowulf's most intimate encounter with a mother—and an unnamed one at that. Grendel's mother's identity is solely in her status as a mother. Despite this, there is lively scholarly work that contends that Grendel's mother is actually a masculine or androgynous figure in the poem. Many scholars, such as M. Wendy Hennequin, invoke Judith Butler's concept of gender performance to interrogate Grendel's mother's masculine behavior and descriptions. Butler defines gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of*

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[5] Dockray-Miller, 100.

[6] Tom Shippey, "Names in Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon England," *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf (The Boydell Press, 2014), 60.

[7] Dockray-Miller, 76.

acts."[8] Grendel's mother "crosses gender lines and performs the functions of warrior, avenger, and king, all generally associated only with men,"[9] and it is because of these gender transgressions—not some inherent physical qualities—that she is ultimately viewed as monstrous. Jane Chance examines the mix of epithets used to describe Grendel's mother and also comments on Grendel's mother's transgressions, saying, "It seems clear from these epithets that Grendel's Mother inverts the Germanic roles of the mother and queen, or lady…[And] unlike most mothers and queens, she fights her own battles."[10] But even considering her masculine performance, it is Grendel's mother's identity as a mother that ultimately drives and defines her. Dockray-Miller says that the "monster-mother" figure "must endure the death of her child and the realization of her failure to mother her son—to protect him."[11] Dockray-Miller asserts that the mothers of the poem "engage in a number of performances…they desire to protect, nurture, and teach their children, and in the heroic world of *Beowulf*, the protective aspect of maternal performance becomes paramount."[12] If one were to consider Beowulf's mother in the context of Dockray-Miller's criteria for a successful mother, she would have to be considered a failure, for having failed to protect Beowulf from danger by his becoming a warrior. It is an interesting intersection that Beowulf, an unprotected son, comes to battle a mother who failed to protect her own son.

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[8] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition*, (Routledge, 1999), 179.

[9] Wendy M. Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," *English Studies* 89, no. 5 (1998): 504.

[10] Jane Chance, "The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990): 249.

[11] Dockray-Miller, 89.

[12] Dockray-Miller, 77-8.

Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother is much more difficult for him than his fight with Grendel. Grendel's mother pulls Beowulf from the open water to her "battle-hall,"[13] where the two are protected from the water and can fight. As he strikes Grendel's mother's head with Unferth's sword, Hrunting:

> [He] discover[s] then
> that the battle-flame [will] not bite,
> or wound her fatally – but the edge fail[s]
> the man in his need; it had endured many
> hand-to-hand meetings, often sheared through helmets,
> fated war-garments. It [is] the first time
> that the fame of that precious treasure [has] failed.[14]

The sword, a phallic symbol, fails to pierce Grendel's mother: this failure of Beowulf's sword suggests that Beowulf is impotent during his encounter with Grendel's mother. His impotency threatens to be his downfall, when, after the sword's failure, Grendel's mother manages to pin Beowulf to the ground and attain a position on top of him. Scholars have long disagreed about the exact translation of *ofsittan*, the word used to describe Grendel's mother's action in gaining power over Beowulf. Many have translated it to "sit upon," which carries sexual inuendo, but Fred C. Robinson says that based on other instances in Anglo-Saxon literature where *ofsittan* appears, there is no evidence to suggest that it literally means "to sit upon."[15] E.L. Risden, however, argues that even if Robinson's suggested translation of "set upon" is accepted over "to sit upon," "the punning suggestion of 'sat on' remains, with its

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[13] *Beowulf* line 1513.
[14] *Beowulf* lines 1522-8.
[15] Fred C. Robinson, "Did Grendel's Mother Sit on Beowulf?," in *Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English*, ed. Malcom Godden, Douglas Gray, and Terry Hoad (Clarendon Press, 1994), 7.

incongruous sexual undertones."[16] "[T]he Anglo-Saxons [use the term] *wæpnedmann*, 'weaponed-person,' as a common means of designating a male person,"[17] so the failure of Beowulf's weapon threatens his literal definition as a man. Dana M. Oswald reinforces this idea, saying that "the possession of weapons is closely related to one's gender and identity—and particularly to masculine identity."[18] When Beowulf fights Grendel, he fights only with his bare hands and rather easily defeats Grendel. When he faces Grendel's mother and has to use a weapon—the use of which designates a person as a man—he flounders and his weapon fails. Finally Beowulf regains a position of power and sees "among the armor a victorious blade, / ancient giant-sword strong in its edges, / worthy in battles; it [is] the best of weapons."[19] Beowulf grabs this sword, "[strikes] in fury / so that it [catches] [Grendel's mother] hard in the neck, / [breaks] her bone-rings,"[20] and beheads her. After this deadly strike, the sword dissolves: "Then the sword [begins], / that blade, to dissolve away in battle-icicles / from the war-blood; it [is] a great wonder / that it [melts] entirely."[21] So, after his own sword fails, Beowulf has to use another man's sword to kill Grendel's mother, and then his borrowed sword (a phallic symbol) dissolves. Oswald says "the masculine authority by which Beowulf lends his fight with Grendel's mother is not his own, but rather is external,

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[16] E.L. Risden, "Heroic Humor in Beowulf," *Humor in Anglo-Saxon literature* (2000): 77.

[17] Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 92.

[18] Dana M. Oswald, "Dismemberment as Erasure: The Monstrous Body in Beowulf," in *Monsters, gender and sexuality in medieval English literature* (Great Britain: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 93.

[19] *Beowulf* lines 1557-9.

[20] *Beowulf* lines 1565-7.

[21] *Beowulf* lines 1605-8.

imbued in the sword, not the man. In taking up this item, Beowulf is bound to succeed, but it is the sword's virility, not his own, that grants him victory."[22] This, again, paints Beowulf to be an impotent man, because even as he is able to stab her, his sword loses its integrity and dissolves once it has entered her body.

Not only do these moments emasculate Beowulf by putting him underneath a female with physical power over him, the Oedipal coloring of these moments in the fight cannot be ignored. Beowulf is a young man without a mother having a sexually charged interaction with a mother who has just lost her son. In no way is this a suggestion that Grendel's mother is Beowulf's literal mother, but she does appear to be a stand-in for the mother figure he lacks. This point is complicated by the fact that Beowulf and Grendel's mother actually share some key traits. Hennequin illustrates their similarities: "[Grendel's mother] shows enormous strength, fights effectively after ruling for fifty years, and can survive in and under the water."[23] But Beowulf also does all of these things. He has an unmatched strength, he rules for fifty years and is still a capable fighter, and he performs impressive feats in and under the water. Again, this is not an argument that the two are literally related, but it does bolster the idea that Grendel's mother is a viable mother figure with whom Beowulf has a sexually charged interaction. Beowulf killing Grendel and Grendel's mother has implications for his complex relationship to family as well. With Grendel's mother acting here as a tainted mother figure for Beowulf, he is in a sense symbolically killing his mother. In Beowulf's success killing Grendel and Grendel's mother, he obliterates an entire (small) family. Here, Beowulf has more than an aversion to family, he actively seeks to destroy it, and he succeeds.

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[22] Oswald, 99.

[23] Hennequin, 513.

In the poem, it is the women who are ultimately most concerned with the matter of succession, and they are willing to circumvent traditional customs of succession in order to set up a future that they see as the most secure for their people. Stacy S. Klein articulates the ways in which the two prominent queens in the poem, Hygd and Wealhtheow, focus on succession and the issues of their sons' kingships. Neither Queen is entirely supportive of their sons' claims to the throne—Wealhtheow cites her sons' youth as a hindrance to their leadership ability, and Hygd does not believe that her son has the strength to defend his kingdom.[24] Both women turn to Beowulf in the issues of succession. After Hygelac's death, Hygd "offer[s] [Beowulf] the hoard and kingdom / [because]…she [does] not trust / that her son could hold the ancestral seat / against foreign hosts."[25] Beowulf rejects this offer to be king of the Geats apparently because Hygd and Hygelac's son, the rightful heir, is still alive, and Beowulf does not want to usurp power. Beowulf passes on an important political opportunity because of unnecessary modesty or a resistance to being included in a family—Hygd, her son, and her daughter are all still alive. In the two cases of Wealhtheow and Hygd, mothers are willing to entrust Beowulf with the safety of their kingdoms. Wealhtheow asks Beowulf to be a faithful ally to her sons when they eventually rule, and Hygd, as mentioned above, literally offers Beowulf the throne over her own son. Beowulf does agree to be a friend to Wealhtheow's sons in the future, because this amount of involvement does not make him "part of the family" in a symbolic or literal way. But Hygd's offer would insert Beowulf into the spot where the genealogical heir to the throne would sit, and this essentially renders him as part of the royal family's bloodline. Beowulf becoming king would also provide him with a symbolic mother—Hygd.

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[24] Klein, 117.

[25] *Beowulf* lines 2369-72.

Beowulf rejects Hygd's offer to literally join the family, but he wholeheartedly embraces the symbolic family that he finds with Hrothgar and cherishes the familial relationship he has with Hygelac. Beowulf is repeatedly able and willing to make strong, familial-like bonds with men throughout the poem. Before going to fight Grendel's mother, Beowulf gives a speech in which he addresses Hrothgar and says: "if ever in your service I should / lose my life, that you would always be / like a father to me when I have gone forth."[26] Beowulf is more than willing to give up his life in service of Hrothgar. When Beowulf later addresses Hygelac, he tells him "Still all my joys / are fixed on you alone; I have few / close kinsmen, my Hygelac, except for you."[27] It appears that Beowulf is more comfortable with and embracing of close relationships with men than with women—both in the political and personal senses. Homosocial bonding is incredibly prominent in Anglo-Saxon literature. In Albrecht Classen's essay in the book *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, he discusses how friendships work in heroic literature. He says that "heroic epics regularly refer to fundamental values closely associated with friendship, but these basically imply military values, such as trust, constancy, reliability, etc."[28] It is critical for men, especially kings and warriors, to make strong homosocial bonds, because those bonds ensure they will have allies during future conflicts.

Not only does Beowulf privilege men and male relationships, he actively distances himself from women, figuratively and literally. Klein says that Beowulf tends to divide the world into binaries, and he "outlines two possible responses to violence—the one interiorized and associated with femininity

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[26] *Beowulf* lines 1477-9.

[27] *Beowulf* lines 2149-51.

[28] Albrecht Classen, *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge, (De Gruyter, Inc., 2011), 430.

and military loss (mourning), and the other exteriorized and associated with masculinity and military glory (seeking vengeance)."[29] One example of the first response to violence is Hildeburh's response to the deaths of her son and brother. She embodies the archetype of the wailing Geatish woman, stricken with grief. She is described as a "sad lady,"[30] and when her son and brother are cremated during their joint funeral, "the lady [sings] / a sad lament."[31] Hrothgar's response to Æschere's death is a more complex case. Hrothgar, a king, is emasculated in his reaction—he laments Æschere's passing in a dramatic speech. Klein says that this response illustrates that Hrothgar is an "aged and impotent [man]."[32] Beowulf spurns Hrothgar's response and tells him: "Sorrow not, wise one! It is always better / to avenge one's friend than to mourn overmuch."[33] Beowulf is embracing what he sees as a masculine persona and distancing himself from an emasculated, feminized affect.

The other binary that Beowulf embraces is that which divides military/political life from domestic life. Klein goes so far as to say that not only is domestic life feminine and military/political life masculine, but that one's involvement in military activity and conquest actually defines one's gender more than any biological sexual difference.[34] She says: "…sexual difference did not simply reside in power but in a highly specific form of power, namely, military power as it was manifested in the roles both men and women played in the constant aggression that was intrinsic to Anglo-Saxon culture, even during times of relative peace."[35] Thus, a person in their

[29] Klein, 114.
[30] *Beowulf* line 1075.
[31] *Beowulf* lines 1117-8.
[32] Klein, 114.
[33] *Beowulf* lines 1384-5.
[34] Klein, 92.
[35] Klein, 92.

role as a fighter or commander is defined as a "man," while a person who takes on peace-weaving is defined as a "woman." This idea is in dialogue with Judith Butler's ideas of cultures inscribing the body with meaning, with much of that meaning relating to gender.[36] A body performing a culturally significant role of fighting is understood as a man's body, for example. Society both teaches these distinctions and reinforces them in practice. Women are defined by their domestic positions as mothers, but they also play a crucial role in the warring process by being cup-passers and peace-weavers between peoples. When Beowulf neglects to take a wife, he not only rejects entry into the domestic sphere of marriage, he makes a statement that a woman cannot be effective in her roles of being a cup-passer or a political peace-weaver through marriage.

Since Beowulf has no wife, he has to function in the political roles that would traditionally be filled by his queen. The main roles played by Anglo-Saxon queens in literature are that of the peace-weaver and the cup-passer in the mead hall. Women were often used as pawns in marriages between unfriendly tribes of people—a marriage of a royal woman from one group with a royal man from another is used as a means of weaving peace between two peoples. Hildeburh is one of these peace-weaving brides in *Beowulf*. Her marriage does not succeed in maintaining peace between her original peoples and those she married into, and both her brother and son are casualties of their conflict. Perhaps because of examples like this, Beowulf does not seem to believe that these peace-weaving marriages can be successful. When discussing Hrothgar's daughter's upcoming marriage with Ingeld of the Heathobards, Beowulf says: "But seldom anywhere / after the death of a prince does the deadly spear rest / for even a brief while, though the bride be good!"[37] Stacy Klein may actually agree with Beowulf on this point. She cites J.M. Wallace-Hadrill

[36] Butler, 13.
[37] *Beowulf* lines 2029-31.

when she says that war and peace were seen not as completely separate concepts, but as two poles on the same spectrum[38]—peace can only exist out of war. Klein goes on to say: "…Beowulf's projected future for Freawaru is perhaps not all that surprising. In a society in which peace is only effected through war and war is defined as the rightful domain of men, weaving peace through female bodies would seem to be theoretically impossible."[39] Beowulf may not have faith in the ability of women to enact peace for this reason, and he appears, by his assumption of and success in the role of peace-weaver, to believe that he can do it better. Beowulf rules his kingdom for fifty years without any major conflicts, thereby succeeding in weaving peace among nations. Beowulf, a man, is able to do this because his male body belongs in the sphere of war, and peace being an aspect of war, only a male person can be successful in its upholding, even though the role traditionally falls on women.

Nonetheless, Beowulf's success keeping peace complicates his gender identity. He performs a feminine task in spite of his male body. Being a peace-weaver is one of the defining roles a queen plays in her life, and by acting in the role of a woman, Beowulf is compromising his masculine gender. Judith Butler says that repeated behaviors that are coded as gendered construct and reinforce gender norms and identities. Using this logic, Beowulf is performing traditional femininity and therefore embodying a feminine gender. It is the disparity between his gendered actions and his sexual body that lead to conflict in his gender expression. Robert Morey takes this argument a few steps further in his article "Beowulf's Androgynous Heroism." Morey says that Beowulf was actually feminized as a peace-weaver at the beginning of the poem when he slays Grendel: "By cleansing Heorot of the curse of the race

[38] Klein, 100.
[39] Klein, 100.

of Grendel, Beowulf achieves a trusted friendship-bond between the Geats and the Danes similar to what would have been expected if he had been exchanged between the two nations as the commodified bride."[40] He cites Beowulf's deep bond with Hrothgar as evidence that their relationship is more promising for peace than any intertribal marriage. He says that "Beowulf serves in the structural role of a good bride, shuttled from one nation to another, laying a foundation for shared peace."[41] But while Beowulf is ensuring peace between nations, he is doing so through violent acts of war, such as killing Grendel and his mother. Violence and battle are male territory, and Beowulf fighting with violence is him acting out his masculine gender. Even though there are points where this masculinity is compromised, such as when he is fighting Grendel's mother and his sword fails, Beowulf succeeds in slaying Grendel and his mother, and because of this success in battle, it must be concluded that Beowulf is acting at least as a masculine peace-weaver, not a feminine peace-weaver. What truly does render Beowulf androgynous, however, is his performance as a peace-weaver later in his life when he is wifeless. Beowulf is able to maintain peace among nations for all fifty years of his tenure as King, and it is not "until / in the dark nights a dragon [begins] his reign, / who guarded his hoard in the high heaths / and the steep stone barrows"[42] that that peace is broken. The awakening of the dragon is not a failure of Beowulf's and does not interfere with his status as a successful peace-weaver or leader.

The other important role that queens play is that of the passer of the mead cup among the men in the mead hall. This action builds community and loyalty among the king's retainers and is crucial for his success in battle. Wealhtheow plays the role of the cup-passer in Heorot during celebratory feasts.

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[40] Robert Morey, "Beowulf's Androgynous Heroism," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95, no. 4, (1996): 486.
[41] Morey, 493.
[42] *Beowulf* lines 2210-3.

During one of her speeches, she tells Beowulf to "take this cup,"[43] and by doing this she is weaving peace between her husband, Hrothgar, and Beowulf, a man who is clearly an important ally to the King. Klein says that "by passing the cup first to her husband, and subsequently offering drinks to the rest of the men, the queen reiterated social hierarchies within the hall, thus staving off potential challenges to royal leadership."[44] Without a queen to fulfill this role, Beowulf has to pass the mead cup himself, and somehow he fails at this, because all except one of his men do not follow him and help him fight the dragon. Wiglaf, the only man to fight the dragon with Beowulf, scolds the other fighters for their cowardice:

> Wiglaf spoke, said to his companions
> many true words – he was mournful at heart –
> 'I remember the time that we took mead together,
> when we made promises to our prince
> in the beer-hall…'[45]

There is thus evidence that Beowulf has attempted to build comradery and loyalty among his men in the mead hall by sharing drinks. But this attempt has clearly failed. Unlike in his success as a peace-weaver, Beowulf fails to adequately practice the tradition of cup-passing. In this way, his attempted androgyny is unsuccessful. Assuming a woman could have been more successful as a cup-passer, as the poem suggests, Beowulf's failure to take a wife to act as cup-passer indirectly leads to the downfall of his kingdom and the untimely end of his life.

Clare A. Lees asserts: "The warrior is the subject of the heroic literature, which emphasizes the male aristocratic groupings of kin and *comitatus*, and is notable for its reticence

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[43] *Beowulf* line 1169.
[44] Klein, 115.
[45] *Beowulf* lines 2631-5.

about matters of women, family, and sexuality."[46] Beowulf never marries, therefore he never has children, thereby dismissing the importance of having a family. Putting the question of marrying for love aside, as it does not seem to be a prominent or even relevant factor to the marriages in *Beowulf*, not marrying or reproducing deprives Beowulf of political benefits and security for his empire. "When Beowulf dies without leaving a son to serve as his successor," Klein says, "he sets in motion grave anxiety about the Geatish future."[47] As he lies dying, he conveys to Wiglaf his regret for not having a son:

> 'Now I should wish to give my war gear
> to my son, if there had been such,
> flesh of my flesh, if fate had granted me
> any heir.'[48]

Considering Beowulf is the king of the Geats, it is hard to imagine a reason why he would have been inhibited from choosing a wife, marrying, and having children. As the king, he would have had his choice of women. Perhaps it was not his choice to forego getting married and having children. Beowulf, after all, appears to be at least metaphorically impotent when his sword fails; it is only when he uses another man's sword that he is able to slay Grendel's mother. It is plausible, then, that Beowulf does not have children because he physically cannot or because his masculinity is so metaphorically damaged. Beowulf fails to become a parent. In this way, he fails to fulfill his role as a man to have an heir to take over after his death, and he fails in his assumption of women's roles

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[46] Clare A. Lees, "Engendering religious desire: sex, knowledge, and Christian identity in Anglo-Saxon England," *The journal of medieval and early modern studies* 27, no. 1, (1997): 22.
[47] Klein, 116.
[48] *Beowulf* lines 2729-32.

by failing to become a mother, a defining element of womanhood.

Beowulf's missing mother unfortunately cannot be explained. In a poem that has so many diverse mothers playing important roles and highlighting key themes, Beowulf's mother's absence is felt even more keenly. What is clear, though, is that the fact that Beowulf's mother is missing is part of a larger pattern of disparities in representations of women in the poem. Some women go unnamed, some influence the futures of their kingdom, some wail and mourn the deaths of their loved ones, and some are monsters. All of these mothers' performances as mothers, women, and queens raise important questions about women's roles in society and what happens when women defy their gender expectations. For some, like Grendel's mother and Modthryth, being violent causes one to be portrayed in the poem not only as unfeminine, but as monstrous. Beowulf also has bizarre gender transgressions that can be linked to his rejection of family and perhaps even physical abnormalities. When he does come in contact with mothers and women in the poem, his behavior changes. He appears to have an aversion to women, and by choosing not to get married, either because of a type of impotence or a lack of desire to have a female counterpart, he and his kingdom falter. His complicated relationship with women and gender carries the hints of discomfort with the situation regarding his missing mother. The underlying circumstances and explanations of that situation may remain mysterious, but it seems unquestionable that the absence of his mother has greatly affected the hero of *Beowulf*.

The absent mother is a trope throughout literature—from fairy tales to gothic novels. Cinderella, in the Grimm fairy tale, loses her biological mother, and the subsequent hardships she endures under the tyranny of her step-mother and -sisters can all be attributed to the initial loss of her mother. Gothic author Mary Shelley is well-known for exploring the effects that a missing or ineffective mother can have

on children.[49] And it is widely discussed in psychological discourse that having an absent or problematic parent can greatly harm a child's healthy development. It is a much more common occurrence in literature, however, for a child character to be missing a parent of the same sex, and this leads one to question the lack of exploration of the effects of a male child missing his female parent, for example. Lacking a parent of the opposite sex and gender would undoubtedly affect the child, and since parents are some of children's primary authorities on gender, it would not be at all surprising that a child lacking an opposite-gendered parent would have a different or incomplete understanding of their own gender identity and performance. As Dockray-Miller says, one of a mother's primary jobs in *Beowulf* is to teach her children, and Beowulf's mother fails to educate her son about family, women's roles in society, and gender. On a literary and a human level, it is not at all hard to believe that Beowulf's missing mother influenced his psyche, his behavior, and his relationship with gender. Beowulf's missing mother deserves critical attention because of the many ways in which Beowulf is altered by her absence.

[49] Sharon L. Jowell, "Mary Shelley's Mothers: The Weak, The Absent, and The Silent in *Lodore* and *Falkner*," European Romantic Review 8, no. 3, (1997): 298.

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