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The Case of the Case for *Beowulf*

Stephen M. Yeager

Abstract
This essay collates and synthesizes many works of feminist Old English scholarship in the service of a thought experiment: what if *Beowulf* was written and/or inscribed by a woman, by women, and/or for an audience of women? How might these possibilities shape our interpretations of the text? In particular, the article identifies possible connections to the *Encomium Emmae reginae*, to the lives of women and transgender saints, and to women's and dual-house monastic foundations. The themes of monstrosity and travel are shown to resonate with gendered anxieties about childbirth and maternity, and Beowulf the "bear-man" is read as a gender-neutral confessor figure who models the ideal virtues of both abbots and abbesses.

Keywords: Emma of Normandy, Hrostvit of Gandersheim, Hild of Whitby, St. Margaret of Antioch, St. Euphrosyne

The term "historical accuracy" in the title of this essay refers to that aspect of a vision of history whereby it conforms to the dominant positions in the published, peer-reviewed scholarship that interprets a given corpus of primary historical evidence. As Adrienne Shaw and other scholars of historical gaming have argued, unexamined notions of historical accuracy can constrain conversations about the past to accidental fields of likely probability, where interpretations of the evidence predominate not because of their unique adherence to the facts, but because of convention and

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convenience.[1] Similar constraints commonly shape scholarly representations of the past, as plausible claims go unexpressed only because everyone assumes beforehand that no one will give them credence, though even this presumption may be false—the majority may be more open to alternative framings of history than we expect.

As Diane Watt discusses in the introduction to her important recent book, early medieval women's authorship is an excellent example of an area of study where progress has been hampered by critical deference to underexamined notions of historical accuracy.[2] Though European culture's patriarchal structures did indeed limit medieval women's access to education and writing, this is hardly a sufficient reason to assume that any given anonymous medieval text was written by an author who identified as a man, especially if the text in question seems at all unusual. Such assumptions seem particularly tenuous in light of that mounting body of evidence suggesting that women's readership and authorship was actually rather common in the early medieval period.[3] Hence there is considerable value to what Watt calls her "speculative" approach, which corrects the tendency of such inherited assumptions to exclude medieval women (and the scholars interested in them) from debates about history and its implications.[4]

Drawing on these studies, on Carol Clover's formative arguments about the configurations of socially constructed gender and biological sex in early

1 Adrienne Shaw, "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and the Politics of Representation in Assassin's Creed III," *Loading…* 9 no. 14 (2015): 4–24; on video games and cultural heritage texts like *Beowulf* see also Xenia Zeiler and Suzie Thomas, "The Relevance of Researching Video Games and Cultural Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2020): 1–3.

2 Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650–1100* (London: Bloombury, 2020).

3 See also Diane Watt, "Lost Books: Abbess Hildelith and the Literary Culture of Barking Abbey," *Philological Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2012), 1–22, and *Medieval Women's Writing* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2007), and also for example Helene Scheck and Virginia Blanton, eds., *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe*, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013 and 2015); Felice Lifshitz, *Religious Women in Early Carolingian Frankia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Jane Stevenson, "Anglo-Latin Women Poets," in *Latin Learning and English Lore*, vol. 2, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 86–107; Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Ashgate, 2000); Joan M. Ferrante, *To The Glory of her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Rosamond McKitterick, "Women's Literacy in the Early Middle Ages," in *Books, Scribes, and Learning in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994); Fred Robinson, "Old English Poetry: The Question of Authorship," *ANQ* (1990), 59–64; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

4 Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion,* 1–20, esp. 10–14.

medieval Northern Europe,[5] and on our increasingly nuanced understanding of textual authority in Old English writing,[6] this essay will apply to the poem *Beowulf* the presumption of Watt and others, that the categories "woman" and "author" are themselves too fraught to assess the likelihood of women's authorship in the irreducibly ambiguous evidence of anonymous medieval texts and textual traditions.[7] Specifically, this essay asks: what would it mean for the Old English poem *Beowulf* if we simply chose to read it as if it were written by a woman, copied by a woman, or intended for an audience of women? Given that the dearth of evidence is so profound that possibilities along these lines are as likely to be true as they are to be untrue, why not proffer full, cogent, and detailed explorations of the possible readings that such theories would open up, and treat them as seriously as we have treated theories that implicitly assume the poem's authors, scribes, and audience(s) to be men?[8] Perhaps the most obvious implications of this framing concern the manuscript juxtaposition of *Beowulf* with the poem *Judith*, but I have decided to deliberately ignore these points of entry, in favor of less obvious but similarly compelling reasons to read *Beowulf* as women's poetry.[9]

5 Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 363–87. On the challenges of historicizing categories of gender and sexuality see also David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–21, esp. 13–15; Carol Braun Pasternack, "Negotiating Gender in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages,* ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 107–142.

6 On the different configurations of Old English textual authority see, for example, Manish Sharma, "Beyond Nostalgia: Formula and Novelty in Old English Literature," *Exemplaria* 26, no. 4 (2014): 303–27; Thomas Bredehoft, *Authors, Audiences, and Old English Verse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); A. N. Doane, "Beowulf and Scribal Performance," in *Unlocking the Word Hoard*, ed. Mark Amodio and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 62–75; Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991). On the link between these two topics of gender and authorship see especially the scholarship of Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, whose work spans not only questions of authority and scribal performance, in *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), but also depictions of women's agency, in *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), esp. 151–245.

7 Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion,* 2.

8 This essay is hardly the first to make this sort of claim about an early or anonymous author. One of the best-known examples is Andrew Dalby's exploration of the idea that Homer (or the other poet of the same name who wrote the *Iliad and Odyssey*) might have been a woman: *Rediscovering Homer* (New York: Norton, 2006).

9 On *Judith* see, for example, Hugh Magennis, "Gender and Heroism in the Old English *Judith*," in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 5–18; Susan Kim, "Bloody Signs: Circumcision and Pregnancy

As I have indicated above, there are many critics working in Old English studies to uncover the evidence for women's readership and authorship in the period. Nonetheless, it is my sense that the specific possibilities for women authors and readers of *Beowulf* have only ever been tentatively addressed by the dominant scholarly conversation around the poem—perhaps out of deference to the common reading of the poem as an aggressively masculinist text, most recently manifest in the decision by Maria Dhavana Headley to translate the famously difficult first word *Hwæt* into the modern slang term "Bro!"[10] Be that as it may, Fred Robinson does briefly cite Paull Baum's speculations about a woman author for the poem in a footnote to his argument about the possibilities for female authorship in early medieval English literature generally, advanced in a brief article ambiguously titled "Old English Poetry: The Question of Authorship" that appeared not in a medieval studies journal but in *American Notes & Queries*.[11] Though we would do well to respect the ambivalence suggested by Robinson's circumspect way of attaching his name to the possibility that we might read *Beowulf* as women's poetry, I think we can still agree that if the co-author of one of the most respected textbooks in the field thinks a case might be made, then the question deserves at the very least to inspire one of those arguments that rage for decades before they are entertainingly summarized for undergraduates in critical introductions to the text.[12] Instead, my sense is that even feminist readers of *Beowulf* like Gillian

in the Old English Judith," *Exemplaria* 11 (1999), 285–307; Ann Astell, "Holofernes' Head: Tacen and Teaching in the Old English Judith," *Anglo-Saxon England* 18 (1989), 117–33; Peter Lucas, "Judith and the Woman Hero," *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 17–27. On *Beowulf* and *Judith* see Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 4–12; Peter Lucas, "The Place of Judith in the Beowulf Manuscript," *Review of English Studies* 41 (1990), 463–78.

10 Headley, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020). On masculinism in *Beowulf* see, e.g., Clare A. Lees, "Men and Beowulf," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 129–48. See further the queer-theoretical approaches to masculinity in the text overviewed by Basil Arnaud Price, "Potentiality and Possibility: An Overview of *Beowulf* and Queer Theory," *Neophilologus* 104 (2020): 401–19, especially Clark, *Between Medieval Men,* 130–43.

11 Robinson, "Question," citing Baum, "The Beowulf Poet," *Philological Quarterly* 39 (1960): 389–99, at 393–94. See also Richard J. Schrader, *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), who says of Baum: "while his reasons are spurious, the idea is not far-fetched" (49). *American Notes & Queries* is a generalist journal which publishes short works on the literature of the English-speaking world.

12 The textbook in question is now in its eighth edition: Bruce Mitchell and Fred Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 8th ed. (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2012).

Overing and Clare Lees, Mary Dockray Miller, Susan Kim, Shari Horner, Megan Cavell, Stacy Klein, Roberta Frank, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and others have rarely done more than intimate the possibility of women authors and readers in the vicinity of *Beowulf*, emphasizing instead the ultimate impossibility of ever answering such questions.[13]

Of course the caution of these women has been absolutely consistent with the larger skepticism of postwar medieval studies about the applicability of modern terms and concepts to medieval manuscript evidence.[14] Nonetheless, I have chosen to simply set aside the methodological issues to address rather the implicit political ones. As I have said, I am hardly the first reader of *Beowulf* to speculate about its possible women audiences, scribes, and authors. If I am (as it seems) one of the first to express my speculations in print, it is only because my privilege protects me from the sorts of personal attacks that commonly damage and even end the careers of queer and trans scholars, women scholars, Indigenous and Black scholars, scholars of color, and contingent faculty when they attach their names to speculative theses. I write this piece at a time when activist scholars are working to transform the field from a site of white supremacy, misogyny, and other forms of active harm into a site of active repair.[15] My intention in writing it is to contribute

13 For example in Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Mary Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Asa Mittman and Susan Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013); Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 2003); Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Joan Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Roberta Frank, "*Quid Hinieldus cum femininis*: The Hero and Women at the End of the First Millennium," in *La Funzione dell'eroe germanico*, ed. Teresa Paroli (Roma: Il Calamo 1995), 7–25; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Women in Old English Reconsidered," *Michigan Academician* 9 (1976): 109–13. Surveys of feminist approaches to Old English poetry include Stacy S. Klein, "Gender," in *A Handbook to Anglo-Saxon Studies,* ed. Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 39–54; Mary Dockray-Miller, "Old English Literature and Feminist Theory," *Literature Compass* 5/6 (2008): 1049–59; Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert Bjork and John Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 311–24.

14 Summarily presented recently in the introduction to *The Medieval Manuscript Book*, ed. Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–16.

15 Histories of harm and plans for reparation are surveyed for example by Mary Rambaran-Olm, Breann Leake, and Micah Goodrich, "Medieval Studies: The Stakes of the Field," *postmedieval*

to these ongoing efforts, answering a request made by Tarren Andrews on behalf of Indigenous Studies that our field should "ask what it might look like to 'extend an invitation to' rather than 'engage with'" approaches and communities that have been historically marginalized within (or even excluded entirely from) Old English studies.[16]

It often happens in my real-life conversations that I will realize, belatedly, that I have spoken over someone else, and cut them off from what they were planning to say. My strategy for addressing this harm when it occurs is to repeat the last idea they expressed, as a way of signaling my intention to listen and my hope that they will continue speaking despite my rudeness. Even when my paraphrase is wrong, the effort generally seems to work, as my errors can sometimes give my interlocutors a welcome chance to clarify their original points. Similarly, my aim in this essay is to synthesize and repeat my understanding of what feminist readers of *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry have argued in their publications about the women authors and readers of the period, before they were interrupted by the field and its arbitrary strictures of so-called historical accuracy. My hope is that I might invite these other readers to return to their thoughts and continue them, at the same time that they might invite new voices to join in and carry the conversation even further.

Specifically, I will use the rest of this essay to invite further conversation about three possibilities: first, that the *Beowulf* manuscript may have been intended for a readership of women; second, that it may have been copied by women scribes; and third, that the poem itself may be attributed to a woman poet. My summaries of these questions will provisionally synthesize extant studies and readings, by the women cited above and others, to show that I believe there is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about reading the poem in this way. If anything, I believe there are more examples of existing readings that will come into sharper focus if female authorship and readership is openly presupposed, than there are new problems raised by such suppositions.

11 (2020), 356–370; Christine Warmbrunn, "Dear Tolkien Fans: Black People Exist," *The Public Medievalist* (Sept. 24, 2020), accessed February 21, 2022, https://www.publicmedievalist.com/tolkien-fans-black-people/; Dorothy Kim, "Introduction the Literature Compass Special Cluster: Critical Race and the Middle Ages," *Literature Compass* 16, nos. 9–10 (2019), e1249; Donna Beth Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts postSaxon Futures* (New York: punctum, 2019); Jonathan Hsy and Julie Orlemanski, "Race and Medieval Studies: A Partial Bibliography," *postmedieval* 8 (2017), 500–31, 527–31.

16 Tarren Andrews, "Introduction: Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts," *English Language Notes* 58, no. 2 (2020): 1–17, at 2.

Women Readers, Women Scribes

The body of our ignorance about *Beowulf* is vast, but a brief summary of it will help to define the parameters of the discussion. We do not know who copied its manuscript, or where they did it, or why. We do not know when it was copied, and since the evidence of the two scripts is contradictory, analysis of the question arguably reveals more about the contingency of our dating criteria than it does about the likely date range of the text.[17] Analyses of dialect and meter have attempted to establish a provenance, but it is my view, at least, that not everyone agrees about what this evidence means.[18] We do not know a single fact about the person or people who wrote *Beowulf*: there are no explicit contemporary allusions to the text, no obvious signatures or other attributions in the manuscript, and very little concrete evidence of any kind. The story's best analogues tend to be brief, tenuous, dated much later, and/or to not be English, and so they provide little help for establishing an immediate context.[19] Finally, as I have stated above, there are many basic methodological challenges to any criticism that would engage with early vernacular poetry and manuscript culture, so for example we do not even know whether modern concepts of "authors" or even "scribes" are useful for thinking about the people who made the words of the poem exist on the parchment in the way that they do.

Let us stick, then, to the dominant positions in the secondary criticism cited above, and assume a date for the manuscript between the start of Æthelred's reign and the end of Cnut's, and an audience in the vicinity of their courts that spans the secular and religious spheres. Given the connections noted by Helen Damico between *Beowulf* and the *Encomium Emmae reginae*, I would suggest that Emma of Normandy is a helpful model for imagining an intended female audience for the *Beowulf* manuscript.[20] Like Thryth,

17 R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xxv–xxxv; Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

18 Eric Weiskott, *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 23–52; Leonard Neidorf, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014); Roberta Frank, "A Scandal in Toronto: *The Dating of Beowulf* a Quarter Century On," *Speculum* 82 (2007): 843–64; Robert Fulk, "Old English Meter and Oral Tradition: Three Issues Bearing on Poetic Chronology," *JEGP* 106 (2007): 304–24; Peter Orton, *The Transmission of Old English Poetry* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

19 *Klaeber's Beowulf*, xxxvi–xliii; Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 98–162; Theodor M. Andersson, "Sources and Analogues," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert Bjork and John Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 125–48.

20 Helen Damico, "Beowulf's Foreign Queen and the Politics of Eleventh-Century England," in *Intertexts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Paul Szarmach*, ed. Virginia Blanton and

Emma was a foreign bride with a posthumous reputation for difficulty;[21] like Freawaru, Emma was a peace offering, first married to Æthelred to unite England with Normandy against the Danes, then married to Cnut with similar goals; like Hildeburh, she mourned the deaths and injuries of both husbands and sons when the peace sought by her marriages failed to hold; like Wealtheow, she had good reason to fear the usurpation and death of her two sons Alfred and Edward, and she tried to protect them with the patronage of a warrior from across the sea; like Hygd, she helped resolve the difficult question of which of her kinsmen should succeed to the throne after her husband's death, and ended up seeing both of her choices become king in turn.

Let us imagine further, and still arbitrarily, that the scribes or perhaps commissioners who assembled this manuscript for a woman like Emma were themselves women, and were, moreover, the inhabitants of a religious house—say, Wilton or Nunnaminster.[22] If a woman's religious community

Helen Scheck (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 209–40. On Emma and the *Encomium* see also Elizabeth Tyler, *England in Europe: English Royal Women and Literary Patronage, c. 1000–c. 1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh Century England* (London: Blackwell, 1997).

21 "Thryth" or "Modthryth" appears in *Beowulf* at line 1931. On this figure see Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood*, 78–88; Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 70. The connection between Thryth and Emma is suggested further by the coincidence that the later legend of Emma and the Plowshares, itself a possible influence on the Middle English romance *Athelston*, falls into the same "accused queen" narrative that also manifests in legends about the two queens of two kings Offa, described in the *Vitae duorum Offarum*, one of whom is named "Dreda" and either of whom could be the figure alluded to in *Beowulf*: Nancy B. Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 69–71; L. A. Hibbard, "Athelston, a Westminster Legend," *PMLA* 36 (1921): 223–244; Graham Drake, Eve Salisbury, Ronald B. Herzman eds., *Four Romances of England: Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997); Michael J. Swanton, *The Lives of Two Offas: Vitae Offarum Duorum* (Devon: The Medieval Press, 2010).

22 On women's literacy in Wilton, Nunnaminster, and other women's foundations at this period see Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*; 117–58; Stephanie Hollis, "Wilton as a Centre of Learning," in *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and* liber confortatorius, ed. Stephanie Hollis, with W. R. Barnes, Rebecca Hayward, Kathleen Loncar and Michael Wright (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 245–80; Jane Stevenson, "Anglo-Latin Women Poets," 93–100; Peter Robinson, "A Twelfth-Century Scriptrix from Nunnaminster," in *Of the Making of Medieval Books: Medieval Manuscripts, Their Scribes and Readers, Essays Presented to M.B. Parkes* (London: Scholar Press, 1997), 73–93; Thomas Hall, "Preaching at Winchester in the Early Twelfth Century," *JEGP* 104, no. 2 (2005): 189–218; Mary Dockray-Miller, *Saints Edith and Aethelthryth—Princesses, Miracle Workers, and their Late Medieval Audience: The Wilton Chronicle and the Wilton Life of St Aethelthryth* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

gifted a manuscript to a wealthy patroness like Emma, or even if it simply produced one for its own enjoyment, then one would expect the manuscript to contain at least a subtext encouraging its female audience to join the house, become a nun, and bring their money with them, as did so many noble widows in this period. Such a subtext may indeed be read into the terrible lives of the women in *Beowulf* listed above, and also more generally into the joint themes of monstrosity, travel, and warrior culture in the manuscript, as these all figure in fairly straightforward ways the horrors of marriage, maternity, and secular womanhood in this era.[23] For example, an aspect of monstrosity not typically emphasized in relation to *Beowulf* is its connection to anxieties around childbirth, as these may be focalized around the specific fear that one's children might be marked by congenital disabilities.[24] Whether or not the actual children of women like Emma suffered from such biological conditions, they certainly ran the danger of moral monstrosity, in the vein of Holofernes, Alexander, Cain, and Grendel. And so I ask: what if the lurid catalogue of the horrors of the outside world found in the *Beowulf* manuscript is designed to first excite the interest of noblewomen like Emma, but then to warn such women that if they succumb to pride and agree to (re)marriage, then they risk putting themselves in the power of the foreign monsters who are their tyrannical and violent husbands and sons?

There are many ways of following up on this hypothesis. For example, we may build on Donna Beth Ellard's recent study to read *Beowulf* as an expression of a (potential) child-bearer's ambivalence towards marriage and family.[25] One particularly exciting path forward might be to conduct comparative studies of the *Beowulf* manuscript and the works of tenth-century author Hrostvit of Gandersheim (ca. 935–973), as her works are concerned with similar themes of paganism, monstrosity, and masculine violence and she is barely one degree of separation from medieval English women's religious houses and their literary output. The networks of possible textual connections between the contexts of the *Beowulf* manuscript and those of Hrostvit's milieu are complex, but there

23 Discussions of maternity and monstrosity in *Beowulf* have typically focused on the figure of Grendel's Mother, for obvious reasons: Paul Acker, "Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 702–16; Renee Trilling, "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," *Parergon* 24, no. 1 (2007): 1–20.

24 On monstrosity and the *Beowulf* manuscript see, for example, J. J. Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999); Mittman and Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts;* Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*.

25 Ellard, "*Beowulf* and Babies," in *Dating Beowulf: Studies in Intimacy,* ed. Daniel C. Remein and Erica Weaver (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2019), 97–119.

are some obvious starting points.[26] First, Hrostvit praised Eadgyth—the English wife (and so foreign bride) of Otto I—in her *Gesta Oddonis*, whose sister Eadburga founded Nunnaminster and became the subject of a fragmentary *vita* in the twelfth-century manuscript Oxford Bodleian 451 that was copied by a Nunnaminster scriptrix.[27] Second, one of the most important collections of early English women's writing appears in the "Boniface correspondence" associated with St. Boniface, the archbishop of Mainz (672–754).[28] Boniface's successors would claim the rights of the diocesan over nearby Gandersheim abbey in a conflict with the bishop of Hildesheim that began shortly after Hrostvit's death (987–1015 CE). Adam S. Cohen and Anne Derbes have argued that this conflict informed the representation of the Fall on the bronze doors of Hildesheim (ca. 1007–1015 CE), and they suggest moreover that the bishop Bernward who commissioned the doors might have been influenced by the Old Saxon/Old English poem *Genesis B.*[29] There are, then, many possible paths for future investigation.

Another possible approach to imagining a woman's readership for *Beowulf* is provided by the other virginal dragonslayer in the Old English corpus, St. Margaret of Antioch. Like Beowulf, Margaret also has a wrestling match with a black, man-shaped demon, and her fluid gender is suggested by those early versions of her life in which she disguises herself as a man.[30] It is

26 One helpful overview of these connections is Rosamond McKitterick, "Ottonian Intellectual Culture in the Tenth Century and the Role of Theophanu," *Early Medieval Europe* 2, no. 1 (1993): 53–74.

27 Hrostvit, "*Gesta Ottonis*," in *Hrostvithae Liber Tertius: A Text, With Translation, Introduction, and Commentary,* ed. and trans. Mary Bernardine Bergman (Covington, KY: The Sisters of Saint Benedict, 1943), 94, lines 75–97. On Eadgyth see also Jane Stevenson, "Anglo-Latin Women Poets," 91; Simon Keynes, "King Athelstan's Books," in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 143–201, 148–49; Christina Lee, "Eclectic Memories: In Search of Eadgyth," *Offa* 58 (2001 published 2004), 277–85. On Bodley 451 see Hall, "Preaching"; Robinson, "Twelfth-Century Scriptrix." On Hrostvit's themes see, for example, Maud McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins* (Palgrave: 2003), 85–110; Katharina M. Wilson, "The Saxon Canoness Hrostvit of Gandersheim," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 30–63.

28 Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 69–115.

29 Adam S. Cohen and Anne Derbes, "Bernward and Eve at Hildesheim," *Gesta* 40, no. 1 (2001): 19–38.

30 Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Paul E. Szarmach, "St. Euphrosyne: Holy Transvestite," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and their Contexts*, ed. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 353–65, 354.

noteworthy that the Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 303 *Life of Margaret* (Ker, *Catalogue*, 57 art. 23) is in a collection that also contains Aelfric's prose *Judith* (art. 73), and that another version, in London BL Cotton Otho B.x (fol. 195), is in the same collection where an Old English *Life of St. Euphrosyne* (Ker, *Catalogue*, 177 art. 10, fol. 61v) directly precedes another witness of the same *Life of St. Christopher* appearing in the *Beowulf* MS (art. 11, fol. 69).[31] This context of circulation and the presence of dragons, demons, prideful pagans and childless heroes in Margaret's legend make it a relatively close parallel to the similar convergences of texts and themes appearing in the *Beowulf* manuscript.

In later years, St. Margaret would become the patron saint of childbirth. If Beowulf is indeed a "bear's son,"[32] then his association with this animal ties him also to the theme of maternity, as the ferocity of mother bears defending their cubs is already proverbial in the Old Testament (Hosea 13:8). Yet the poem also makes much of the fact that Beowulf has no children (lines 2729–31), and that he views the entire nation of the Geats as the benefactors of his will (2797–98). I propose that we think about this connection between Beowulf and Margaret through Robin Norris's reading of the Old English *Life of St. Euphrosyne* cited above, and so consider that this poem about Beowulf the quasi-maternal, (apparently) virginal, Margaret-like demon-wrestler and dragonslayer might be another gender- and genre-bending attempt to meet the demand among women readers for lives of women confessors.[33] As a work of "woman's literature," then, *Beowulf* would integrate the matter of an "old wives' tale" about a monster-fighting bear-man into the quasi-legendary history of Geats and Danes to figure how the brides of Christ may operate as sexless but effective political leaders in a patriarchal heroic society—neither "wifmenn" nor "waepnedmenn," but something in between.[34] Beowulf's description of his careful, protective stewardship arguably sounds more like that of a great abbot or abbess cultivating good

31 D. G. Scragg, "The Corpus of Anonymous Lives and Their Manuscript Context," in Szarmach, *Holy Men and Holy Women*, 209–30. The third and final *Life of Margaret* appears in Cotton Tiberius A.iii; see N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 186 art. 15.

32 *Klaeber's Beowulf*, xlii–iii; Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 121.

33 Robin Norris, "Genre Trouble: Reading the Old English Vita of Saint Euphrosyne," in *Women Writing Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 121–139. See also Clark, *Between Medieval Men*, 195–209. On Beowulf's hagiographic analogues see Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 149–51.

34 "Women" and "men," where the marker of the latter's gender is his possession of a weapon; contrasted, e.g., in *Beowulf*, line 1284. Beowulf is famously unable to use a sword effectively, and the poet herself calls attention to this fact at, e.g., lines 2682–87.

relationships with neighboring lords than it does like a great king expanding his territory:

> næs se folccyning,
> ymbesittendra ænig ðara,
> þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste,
> egesan ðeon. Ic on earde bad
> mælgesceafta, heold min tela,
> ne sohte searoniðas, ne me swor fela
> aða in unriht. (733–39)
>
> (There was no king, of any neighbouring area, who dared to approach me with warriors or to threaten terrors. In the land I awaited contingencies, I held well my [possessions], I sought no contrived conflicts, and I did not swear many oaths wrongfully.)

For the remainder of this essay, I will sketch out how we may apply this framing to read *Beowulf* as a sort of mirror for religious women, and abbesses in particular.

Women Poets

Near the beginning of *Beowulf*, we see the creation of an enclosed space named Heorot, whose establishment occasions a song whose theme is obviously connected to that of Caedmon's famous hymn.[35] Given the broad parallel between this scene and Bede's legend, I propose that we imagine the newly founded Heorot as a pagan prefiguration of the dual-foundation monastic space of Hild's Whitby, where Caedmon's miraculous composition took place.[36] Bede's myth famously effaces Hild herself from the history of Whitby and of Old English poetry, in a manner that Watt suggests is

35 On the importance of the enclosure as a metaphor connecting virginity to women's religious spaces see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture 1150–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially Chapters 1 and 2. Of particular interest is her discussion of the many early medieval English virgins who are remembered for acts of endowment and foundation, at 57–67.

36 The parallel is strengthened somewhat if we allow the possibility that Heorot is coded as a space of pagan worship, argued by, e.g., J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 329–38. Then the song that marks the foundation of Heorot would be parallel to the hymn that, for Bede at least, marks a moment of foundation of the Christian Old English poetic tradition: Sharma, "Beyond Nostalgia."

consistent with his larger pattern of "overwriting" women authors in his works.[37] And as Lees and Overing observe in their important reading of the episode, Bede's characterization of Hild as a mother is crucial to her effacement in his text: as they say, maternity is "doubly appropriated" by Bede, as it is "emptied of its gendered force and specificity and reabsorbed into the masculine economy as a means of production under masculine control." In brief, "maternity is sterilized."[38] I would suggest, then, that we may read the parallel episode in *Beowulf* as attempting a strategic version of this same sterilization and erasure, emptying maternity of its gendered force so that it may negotiate with but ultimately withdraw from the masculine economy of power as a strategy for protecting a community of religious women.

It is noteworthy that the poem's juxtaposition of the story of creation and the story of Cain and Abel skips over the story of Adam and Eve, but only after suggesting it in lines 99–101:

> Sægde se þe cuþe
> frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
> cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte†,
> wlitebeorhtne wang, swa wæter bebugeð,
> gesette sigehreþig sunnan ond monan
> leoman to leohte landbuendum
> ond gefrætwade foldan sceatas
> leomum ond leafum, lif eac gesceop
> cynna gehwylcum þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.
> *Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon*
> *eadiglice, oððæt an ongan*
> *fyrene fremman feond on helle.*
> Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten… (90–103)

> (He spoke, who could describe the first creation of men long ago, and said that the almighty made the earth, the brilliant plain surrounded by water, set triumphant the sun and moon lights as light to land-dwellers, and adorned the corners of the earth with branches and leaves, shaped each life for each of the species that dwelled there alive. *So the noble humans dwelled in joys happily, until one began to commit crimes, a fiend in Hell.* The grim spirit was called Grendel…)

37 Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 14–18, 21–39.

38 Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 26. For another compelling reading of this episode see Sharma, "Beyond Nostalgia."

The lines I have emphasized here seem at first to be an allusion to these original dwellers in paradise and their fall at the hands of the devil. Then in line 102, we learn that in fact the previous four lines were not about Adam and Eve at all—this "devil" is named Grendel, and so the noble humans must be the Danes and the paradise defaced Heorot.[39] In this feint, which briefly casts Grendel the descendant of Cain in the role of the devil who tempted Eve, we see an implicit reading of the story of creation that will hold for the rest of the poem. Insofar as Cain's mother is, through her son, the ultimate progenitrix of the race of monsters that will personify the culturally destructive forces of masculine territorial aggression throughout the poem, Eve's original sin is tightly linked to her decision to have sex and have children.[40]

It is perhaps important here that Grendel is given the longest lineage of any character in the poem, and that this (monstrous) continuity is contrasted with the constant subversion of primogeniture in the dynastic successions described in the poem. Scyld Scefing is an orphan, Hrothgar and Hygelac are younger brothers, Beowulf is a cousin, and in each of these instances discontinuity in the royal bloodline leads to long-lasting, peaceful regimes. Lines 12–19 of the poem, which cite Scyld's foundation of a royal line as proof of his excellence as a king, are part of a larger pattern of comparison between this figure and the childless Beowulf—though perhaps there is more to be made of the irony implicit in the clearest parallel between the two, which is that their pagan funerals are both lavishly and mournfully described.[41] Perhaps this opening blandishment to the effect that filial continuity in the royal line does indeed bring peace to a nation serves only to introduce the culturally received notion that the remainder of the poem will ironize and undermine, starting with the famously ambiguous lines at the conclusion of Scyld's funeral: "men ne cunnon … hwa þæm hlæste onfeng" (men do not know … who received that cargo; 50–52). Scyld may have founded a royal line, but the question of who inherited his wealth is pointedly left open for debate.

Read in this way, then it would seem that the poem's construction of heroism is directed towards the impossible task of imagining a mode of

39 On Grendel the "enemy in hell" in these lines and his connection to Cain see *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 121–23; Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 64.

40 On Cain and the race of monsters see Ruth Mellinkoff's two-part article "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*," in *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 143–62 and *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1980): 183–97.

41 On these funerals see Gail R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

gender-neutral virginity that may neither threaten nor be threatened by the dominant masculine symbolic order, and in particular its impossible mandate to procreate and pass power to one's descendants in the future. While it might be putting too fine a point on it, it is nonetheless the case that Grendel—whose descriptions, as we well know, slide back and forth between words meaning "monster" and words meaning "man"[42]—cannot be slain with a phallic sword, but is defeated only when Beowulf grips and constrains him.[43] Grendel's attempted *raptus* of Beowulf leads directly to his symbolic castration (enacted twice), just as surely as Holofernes's seduction of Judith led to his own, and just as surely as Roman pagan men suffer humiliation and death when they attempt to force themselves on holy virgins in the conventional hagiographic *passio*.

The great difference between Beowulf and the women in its hagiographic analogues is that his fight against Grendel is not the climax, but the introduction of his story. The heart of the poem is what happens next, in the series of digressions and adventures which model in different ways versions of the question: how does one live as a virtuous woman in the early medieval North Atlantic? As many have said, the secular women of the poem offer no helpful model along these lines: motherhood, wifehood, and even daughterly filial duty all lead only to suffering.[44] The alternatives to their subjected femininity presented by the poem are threefold: Grendel's mother, Hrothgar, and Beowulf himself. In the first instance, Grendel's mother confounds the symbolic order in the poem through her profoundly literal embodiment of the animal and biological condition of femininity and motherhood, through which her precise, measured vengeance for her son practices both the retributive justice of the masculine realm and the instinctive guardianship of the bear protecting her cubs.[45] Perhaps the radical suppression of Grendel's mother undertaken by the Danes and Geats, who ride out in full force against her as they never did against Grendel himself, serves to represent

42 Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Beowulf, Lines 702b–836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23, no. 4 (1981): 484–94. See most recently Adam Miyashiro, "Homeland Insecurity: Biopolitics and Sovereign Violence in Beowulf," *postmedieval* 11 (2020): 384–95.

43 For a study of binding in OE poetry and its relation to gender see Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*.

44 Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood,* 77–115; Hansen, "Women," 117; Schrader, *God's Handiwork,* 36; Baum, "The Beowulf Poet," 393.

45 On Grendel's mother as a bear protecting her cub see James Paz, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 34–58; Acker, "Horror"; Trilling, "Beyond Abjection."

the likely consequences that await women who exercise agency so unapologetically.[46] They are dehumanized, excluded from the system, and subjected to violence, and for these pragmatic reasons their efforts must be categorized as failures.

The second, similarly dissatisfying model is Hrothgar, who is the formal, rational alternative to the materiality and affect of Grendel's mother. Hrothgar may be feminized, as Stacy Klein has written, and he may advocate the feminine virtues of patience and humility, but he ultimately remains a husband and a father, and so he cannot serve in the final instance as a model for feminine political authority.[47] The impossible, quasi-monstrous figure for the ideal fusion of Grendel's mother and Hrothgar is Beowulf himself, who returns to the Geats a sexless synthesis of the two models. Moving beyond his success as a wrestler of demons, on the model of martyrs like Margaret and Juliana, Beowulf has been transformed by his journey into a confessor able to speak to masculine authority for the benefit of his community, and to keep his enemies at bay. He is gracious when Hygelac condescendingly questions his strength and intelligence; he sees the folly of Freawaru's marriage, and seems not to marry himself; and like so many women leaders of early medieval religious communities, his greatest failure is his inability to ensure that his community might thrive after his death without his great strength and reputation to protect it, as indeed the rich endowment he amasses to guarantee its stability and autonomy leads rather to its invasion and destruction—a sad conclusion whose particular consequences for women are emphasized at Beowulf's funeral by the mournful figure of the singing *Geatisc meowle* (Geatish woman; 3150).

Indeed, given that *Beowulf* is an elegiac and ambivalent poem about a vanished age, when communities under constant threat of invasion and war managed only imperfectly to keep those forces at bay, we may ask: what if the nostalgia for the nations of the Geats and Spear-Danes in the poem expressed a memory of the great female and dual religious houses of

46 On the suppression of Grendel's mother see Trilling, "Beyond Abjection"; Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 101–2, and "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 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 248–61; Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood*, 88–96; Mary Kay Temple, "*Beowulf* 1258–1266: Grendel's Lady-Mother," *English Language Notes* 23, no. 3 (1986): 10–15; Helen Damico, Beowulf*'s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 122; Christine Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," *Comitatus* 23, no. 1 (1992): 1–16.

47 Klein, *Ruling Women*, 87–123, esp. 111–13.

the early medieval period, that "golden age of female monasticism" before women's houses were threatened (and in many cases destroyed) in the invasions and raids of the ninth century?[48] Might not the mournful singing of the Geatish woman figure the mourning of widows whose desire to escape the humiliation and slavery of marriage was frustrated by their sense that in their own time, women's religious houses only rarely outlasted their founding royal patronesses?[49] Might this not explain why the horrors of marriage and secular life should be such a persistent theme in this poem's telling of the legend of Beowulf, whose half-pagan world of quasi-historical myth provided a relatively open conceptual space that enabled the poet to present not only the virtues a great abbess ought to have, but also the sorts of contradictions and failures that have always faced such women when they undertook the doomed, heroic, and (in the opinion of some) monstrous task of pushing back against the patriarchy?

Though it may seem as if I have phrased these questions rhetorically, they are in fact sincere. I acknowledge that my rapid survey of earlier scholarship and more-rapid summary of possible readings has surely ignored some obvious challenges and insufficiently addressed others, moved quickly through or completely ignored complex and nuanced debates, and committed many other sins against our basic methodologies. Nonetheless, I hope that I have sketched out a few helpful points for reviving an overdue conversation about the possible women's authorship and readership of the poem *Beowulf*. First, the many digressions in the poem's narrative concerning the lives of women suggest the presence of women in the audience, who would find such digressions pertinent to their own experiences. Second, we may identify Emma of Normandy as one potential audience member who would have found these digressions particularly pertinent to her own experience, though certainly any noblewoman of the period might relate to them. By the same token, women's religious houses are highly plausible venues for the scriptorium that produced the manuscript of *Beowulf*, especially given the theme of monstrous masculinity running through the manuscript's texts. Finally, the analogues to *Beowulf* among women saints' lives enable us to frame the poem as fundamentally concerned with the question of how to practice feminine, virginal virtue in a masculine world of patrilineal, territorial aggression, which framing is highly amenable to theories of women's

48 Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood*, 10. See also Foot, *Veiled Women*. On nostalgia in *Beowulf* see Susan M. Kim, "'As I Once Did with Grendel': Boasting and Nostalgia in Beowulf," *Modern Philology* 103, no. 1 (2005): 4–27.

49 On the ambiguity of this woman see Helen Bennett, "The Female Mourner at Beowulf's Funeral: Filling in the Blanks/Hearing the Spaces," *Exemplaria* 4, no. 1 (1992): 35–50.

authorship. It is my hope that whether or not these investigations lead to new insights and readings, the exploration itself will prove useful, both as a step towards a better understanding *Beowulf* and as a step towards our more pressing task of opening up our field to let new voices speak.

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