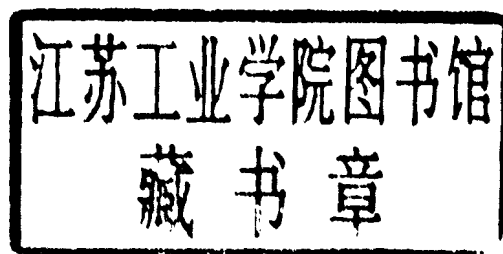# POETRY

CRITICISM

VOLUME

85

Poetry

Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 85

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

GALE
CENGAGE Learning

GALE
CENGAGE Learning™

For product information and technology assistance, contact us at **Gale Customer Support, 1-800-877-4253.**
For permission to use material from this text or product, submit all requests online at **www.cengage.com/permissions.**
Further permissions questions can be emailed to **permissionrequest@cengage.com**

While every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Gale, a part of Cengage Learning, does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

Preface

*P*oetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

Organization of the Book

Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *PC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *PC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *PC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order all individual poems, book-length poems, and collection titles contained in the *PC* series. Titles of poetry collections and separately published poems are printed in italics, while titles of individual poems are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing *Poetry Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 79-88. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series
Gale
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)
Fax: 248-699-8054

Acknowledgments

Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xi

Beowulf

Anonymous

Old English epic poem, c. eighth century. For further discussion of *Beowulf*, see *PC*, Vol. 22

INTRODUCTION

The first surviving major poem in English literature, *Beowulf* presents an account of medieval warriors, heroes, and monsters. The work is written in Old English and consists of 3,182 lines, relatively short for an epic poem. Its author is unknown.

TEXTUAL HISTORY

Many scholars believe that the poem was composed in the eighth or ninth century, but the earliest extant manuscript dates from approximately 975 to 1000. There is some evidence, however, that an even earlier written version may have existed, possibly from the late seventh or early eighth century, which was in turn preceded by an earlier oral version. Laurence Nowell, a sixteenth-century Englishman, is the earliest known owner of the surviving manuscript, although he left no record of where or how he obtained it. In 1731, it became part of the manuscript collection of Sir Robert Cotton. At some point, while in Cotton's possession, the manuscript was damaged in a fire resulting in serious deterioration of the text. "Thorkelin A" and "Thorkelin B," both transcriptions of the original manuscript by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin and both dated 1787, became the basis for the first printed edition of the work.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Although the poem contains a number of lengthy digressions devoted to Danish and Geatish history, the basic plot of *Beowulf* is fairly straightforward. Hrothgar, the King of the Danes, and his people are being terrorized by the monster Grendel, who makes regular incursions into Heorot, the Danish great hall. Beowulf, nephew of Hygelac, the King of the Geats, travels to Denmark to offer assistance. Beowulf kills Grendel, but then must contend with the monster's mother, whom he also slays. The grateful Danes shower Beowulf with acclaim and treasure. He returns to his homeland, where he eventually succeeds Hygelac as King of the Geats, a position he holds for the next fifty years. His final challenge is to slay a dragon that has been attacking the Geats; he does so with the help of his faithful nephew, Wiglaf, the only one of his men who does not abandon him in his pursuit of the dragon. Beowulf discovers the treasure the dragon was guarding and then dies of the wounds he received in the fight. The poem ends with Beowulf's funeral, during which he is once again acclaimed as a hero.

MAJOR THEMES

The importance of loyalty between rulers and thanes has long been considered one of the primary themes of *Beowulf*, as the poem demonstrates how loyal retainers are rewarded with both treasure and acclaim in exchange for acts of bravery in the service of their king. Many modern critics have focused on the opposition of Christian and pagan values in the poem. Richard Bodek recounts the long-standing critical debate over which set of values is privileged by the *Beowulf*-poet, noting that the late nineteenth-century critic F. A. Blackburn favored the pagan reading, while J. R. R. Tolkien argued that the poem is Christian, a view that dominated most twentieth-century scholarship. Bodek, however, analyzes Hrothgar's advice to Beowulf in which the king "warns him that focusing on the old standards will be a much surer way to a good life," because "God's blessing and favor are fickle. They can be rescinded without warning, leading to a life emptied of happiness." Since the rest of the text suggests that Beowulf accepts this advice, Bodek contends that the older values associated with the pagan heroic code have been valorized by the poet. Manish Sharma has also studied the narrative boundaries between the pagan world and the Christian world and suggests that the Christian Anglo-Saxons were ambivalent in their assessment of their "noble pagan ancestors." According to Sharma, "while the poet conceivably was bound by his faith to relegate Beowulf to ignorance and perdition, what we read in the margins of his text seems to confirm the enduring power of the pagan past to make incursions into the Christian present."

The importance of kinship ties and the rules of succession are also significant themes of the poem. Frederick M. Biggs suggests that the differing responses to the

deaths of Hondscioh and Æeschere at the hands of Grendel and Grendel's mother, respectively, is indicative of the weak kinship ties among the Geats versus the strong loyalties among the Danes. According to Biggs, the poet seems to be suggesting through this contrast that Beowulf will be able to stop the violence caused by strong kinship connections, which are not always viewed in a positive light, particularly in the case of Grendel and his mother. Eric Stanley (see Further Reading) has studied the *Beowulf*-poet's concerns with the rules of succession and the fear of lordlessness—that period between rulers characterized by instability and chaos. "The fear of the Anglo-Saxons was lordlessness and unsettled times of usurpation and the deposition and expulsion or murder of rightful and unrightful kings," all of which are expressed in *Beowulf* according to Stanley. Biggs concurs, claiming that "there can have been few more fraught moments for Anglo-Saxon kingdoms than the transitions following the end of one rule and the establishing of the next." According to Biggs, the poet handles the gradual changes taking place in the rules of succession by exploring "the strengths and weaknesses of what he perceives to be two opposing views, the older Germanic assumptions about eligibility for the throne and the newer Christian ideals." Michael D. C. Drout contends that there was a two-track system in place after Hrothgar's death: the one based on blood, which would place Hrothgar's sons in line for the throne; and the other based on deeds, which suggested that neither of them were suited to rule. For Drout, an analysis of the two inheritance systems sheds light on a number of enigmatic passages in the poem, but he points out that both have drawbacks since "blood-only replication leads to extinction," whereas "deeds-only replication leads to uncontrollable violence."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

An area of concern for a number of modern critics involves the position of women in *Beowulf*. Mary Dockray-Miller, for example, has studied the female character Modthrydho, and contends that not only does she not fit into any of the available female roles, she exercises power in the same way that the poem's males do. "She is neither a reformed peace pledge nor a heroic Valkyrie," according to Dockray-Miller, and her "masculine performance manages to subvert the usual use of women as objects in exchanges between men." Daniel F. Pigg suggests that *Beowulf* is not the clear-cut representation of male hegemony that it is often assumed to be; rather, he contends, "the poem foregrounds the destructive aspects of a warlike masculinity." Pigg also points to the significant role of women in the poem, particularly in commenting on and critiquing the behavior of the male characters. He offers as an example Queen Wealtheow who was "more than a ceremonial

cup bearer and giver of gifts; she was a skilful diplomat, preventing her husband Hrothgar from making a fatal mistake."

Gale R. Owen-Crocker has studied the structure of *Beowulf* and identifies "a linear structure of three movements, each with an introductory funeral and each containing a monster-fight." Owen-Crocker adds that "the final funeral, Beowulf's, acts as a coda to the whole." David Herman and Becky Childs have studied the function of narrative in noting that the text acts as a bridge between the oral tradition of the Anglo-Saxon culture and the written tradition of the emerging early English culture. They believe that even before the beginnings of literacy, narrative "has served as a support for the formulation, systematization, and transmission of communal as well as personal experiences and values." Thus, *Beowulf* "testifies to the longlastingness of narrative as a tool for thinking."

Howell Chickering, reporting that a new translation of *Beowulf* appears every other year on average, comments on Seamus Heaney's best-selling 1999 version. The Heaney translation has generated a fair amount of controversy, with some Anglo-Saxon scholars pejoratively labeling the work *Heaneywulf*. In general, however, it was not only critically acclaimed, but enormously popular as well; Chickering notes that it appeared on best-seller lists in both England and America. He contends that the translations of the dramatic speeches are the most successful parts of Heaney's version, since "passage after passage delivers the sense and tone of the Old English with effortless grace." Felicia Jean Steele also discusses Heaney's translation, crediting the scholarship of J. R. R. Tolkien, particularly his essay "Monsters and the Critics," for inspiring Heaney's representation of the dragon: Steele believes that "adapters and translators of the poem, so accustomed to Tolkien's worldview . . . have begun to translate the poem as interpreted by Tolkien," and she includes Heaney among them.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Principal Modern Translations

Beowulf, The Oldest English Epic [translated by Charles W. Kennedy] 1940
Beowulf: A Verse Translation into Modern English [translated by Edwin Morgan] 1952
Beowulf [translated by David Wright] 1957
Beowulf [translated by Burton Raffel] 1963

Beowulf: A New Translation [translated by E. Talbot Donaldson] 1966
Beowulf [translated by Michael Alexander] 1973
Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition [translated by Howell D. Chickering, Jr.] 1977
Beowulf [translated by Albert W. Haley] 1978
Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North [translated by Marijane Osborn] 1983
Beowulf [translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland] 1984
Beowulf [translated by Seamus Heaney] 1999

CRITICISM

Mary Dockray-Miller (essay date fall 1998)

SOURCE: Dockray-Miller, Mary. "The Masculine Queen of *Beowulf.*" *Women and Language* 21, no. 2 (fall 1998): 31-8.

[*In the following essay, Dockray-Miller discusses the role of Queen Modthrydho in* Beowulf, *a female character who wields power in a completely masculine way.*]

Recent *Beowulf* criticism, like most areas of medieval studies, has seen inquiry into female characters and the place of the feminine in the text. Critics in the 1980s like Helen Damico and Jane Chance focused for the first time specifically on the women in *Beowulf.* In 1990 Gillian Overing's *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* brought postmodern gender theory to the poem. These texts and others like them, however, leave intact the equation of women with the feminine and men with the masculine.

This equation is disrupted when the text is read within the rubric of gender performance as determined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter.* Performativity enables a new way of interpreting the characters of *Beowulf,* specifically, in the world of the poem masculinity is power, most emphatically the power to control the actions of others. The violent queen Modthrydho illustrates the performative nature of the gender of power and shows that action, rather than biological sex, is the determinant of that gender. Modthrydho, though female, is ultimately masculine since she wields power in the same way that *Beowulf* does.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* clarify the notion of gendered performances that are repeated to the point where they seem natural or inevitable (although they are neither). Butler says that perfor-

mance, not biology, determines gender: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Trouble* 25). In *Bodies That Matter,* Butler expands upon this notion of performativity, which, she emphasizes, is not a subjective, conscious "choice" by an already essentialist, humanist "self." In *Bodies,* Butler corrects misperceptions by readers of *Trouble* stating that by "performativity" she did not mean that

> . . . one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night.
>
> (*Bodies* x)

Rather than the subject deciding its gender, "gender is part of what decides the subject" (*Bodies* x). One cannot precede the other in some sort of linear progression. Genders are not constructed onto pre-existing sexed bodies; gender construction is not an act that can be deemed "finished" at a certain point (*Bodies* 9). The performativity of gender depends on an understanding of gender construction as an ongoing process (or performance) that is never ultimately complete.

That ongoing process depends on repetition and reinscription of "norms" of gender. Butler's arguments about the materiality of the body insist upon "the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (*Bodies* 2). As such, what humanity has traditionally perceived as "the 'sexes'" are, for Butler, actually "normative positions" (*Bodies* 14). Such a position takes its place in a "citation" of previous performances, so that performances layer one upon another to posit an illusion of determined sex. For Butler, "Performativity is not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (*Bodies* 12). While she is most interested in female and feminine performances, citations, and repetitions, Butler also briefly inquires into racial and racist performance (*Bodies* 18).

Butler's main goal, if that term is not too teleological for such a philosopher, is examination of examples of "disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized" (*Bodies* 4); for her, it is those sites of disidentification that serve to undermine what she calls "the heterosexual imperative" (*Bodies* 2), "the regime of heterosexuality" (*Bodies* 15), or "compulsory heterosexuality" (*Trouble* viii) that reigns in contemporary Western culture. As such, norms of

gender construction may seem inflexible when they are defined as "the repeated stylization of the body" (*Trouble* 33); yet disidentification, or slippage from those norms, is what reveals their very un-natural constructedness and provides ways to challenge those norms. Such an "enabling disruption" overlooks or resists citations of the norm, and refuses to cite such a norm, insisting on a performance without precedent.

Such performativity affords a new way of looking at the "evil queen" of Beowulf, Modthrydho, and watching her disruptive gender performance. Although Overing's discussion of gender in *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* ultimately focuses on women and the feminine, her discussion of the "masculine economy" of *Beowulf* provides entree into my analysis of Modthrydho as a figure who wields power to enact a masculine performance. In Overing's terms:

> In the masculine economy of the poem, desire expresses itself as desire for the other, as a continual process of subjugation and appropriation of the other. The code of vengeance and the heroic choice demand above all a resolution of opposing elements, a decision must always be made.
>
> (70, italics Overing's)

For Overing, masculinity in *Beowulf* entails dominance and resolution; no ambiguity of hierarchy, of gender, of decision, is permissible. She continues:

> A psychoanalytic understanding of desire as deferred death, of the symbolic nature of desire in action, is often not necessary in *Beowulf*, death is continually present, always in the poem's foreground: the hero says "I will do this or I will die." Resolution, choice, satisfaction of desire frequently mean literal death.
>
> (70)

Men in *Beowulf* for Overing, live in a world of absolutes: they will fight the monsters or die, they will avenge a death or die. Overing reads Beowulf himself to test this absolute assertion, but acknowledges that the absolute resolution is intact even at the end of the poem. The masculine characters define themselves against an unfavorable Other: men are strong, noble, generous; the Other is weak, ignoble, miserly—and might as well be dead, for within the masculine economy of this poem, those attributes have no value. Within the terms of Overing's analysis, Modthrydho is masculine; she forces an acknowledgement that masculinity is not "natural" but constructed, since a woman can say, "I will do this or I will die."

After surveying critical views of Modthrydho and her role, I will examine two words, mundgripe and handgewrithene, which reveal Modthrydho's lexical association with Beowulf and show that she cannot merely be dismissed as an evil queen who becomes good after

marrying the right man. She is neither a reformed peace pledge nor a heroic Valkyrie. Instead, her character both confirms and denies a masculine economy that depends on women as commodities. In the terms described in Luce Irigaray's *Women on the Market*, Mothrydho's masculine performance manages to subvert the usual use of women as objects in exchanges between men.

The brief episode in question tells the story of Mothrydho's actions before and after her marriage to Offa; it appears abruptly in the text after a description of the Geat queen Hygd. (Please see complete text with translation following the notes).[1] Unlike Hygd, Mothrydho was not initially good, wise, and generous, a model queen; the men who dare to look upon her in her father's hall are put to death. She "reforms," however, after her marriage to Offa, and the poet ends the brief section of narrative with praise of her that eventually turns into praise of her husband and son.

Critics have tended to view this story of Mothrydho only within the larger context of the poem, usually reading Mothrydho as a foil to Hygd, Higelac's queen, who is described as a good queen, young, beautiful, wise, and generous in the lines leading up to the Mothrydho episode (1925-1931). In contrast, Mothrydho orders men who dare to look on her to be killed (1933-1940). However, after her marriage to Offa, Mothrydho changes to become like Hygd, generous, loved, and fertile: a good queen who managed to overcome her wicked tendencies.[2]

A different "explanation" of the episode is patristic and reads the Mothrydho story as a Christian allegory, with Offa as Christ the bridegroom, to whom Mothrydho submits and finds happiness much like the good Christian does in submission to Christ.[3] Masculinist readings view the Mothrydho episode as a triumph, within the context of the poem, of the right, "natural" order of male over female, focusing on the "tamed shrew" aspect of the passage and revealing the critical desires of their authors to naturalize male domination of women, at least in the world of the text.[4]

Another focus of formalist critics is the abrupt transition to the Mothrydho story. In order to show the passage's stylistic similarity to the rest of the poem, critics have sought other points in *Beowulf* at which the subject matter swings suddenly from one narrative to another without warning.[5] Similarly, Klaeber and others fit the "digression" into a moral vision of the poem wherein the story of Mothrydho is an opportunity for the poet to make a moral exemplum like others in the poem.[6]

Mothrydho's name, her very existence, and possible historical precedents for her have provoked considerable critical discussion. The crux "modthrydho waeg"

(1.1931) can be read to include or not to include a name; if there is a name, it can be read as Mothrydho or as Thrydho. Historical critics, who stress the documented precedents for a number of the characters in *Beowulf,* search for Mothrydho among a number of candidates, who include the violent and exiled Queen Drida; Cynethrydh, the notoriously cruel wife of Offa II; and Hermethruda, a Scottish queen who has a minor part in Saxo Grammaticus' story of Amleth.[7] This sort of thematic, structural, moral, or historical analysis illustrates Overing's postmodern contention about criticism of the Mothrydho passage, that "a place is found for the unmannerly queen in the larger context of the poem, one that connects, and assimilates her through opposition" (102).

The political aims of feminist critics are quite different from those of the traditional (mostly male) critics discussed above, but feminists, with the notable exception of Overing, also tend to shape Mothrydho and her story into a unified vision of Woman, be it in *Beowulf,* Old English Literature, or Anglo-Saxon culture at large, to "explain her."[8]

Mothrydho does act as a foil to Hygd and historical precedents for her character do exist. However, two distinctive if ambiguous words in the Mothrydho passage reveal a Mothrydho who is not so easily subsumed into patterns of the poem or of Old English literature that most critics present. These words, mundgripe (1938) and handgewrithen (1937), link Mothrydho with Beowulf in such a way that the categories of good and evil, masculine and feminine, become much harder to distinguish. Although lexically she is linked to the hero, the narrator tells us that she performed criminal acts (firen' ondrysne, 1932). She deprives beloved men (leofne mannan 1943) of life, but she is an excellent queen of the people (fremu folces cwen 1932).[9] It seems that even the poet cannot quite make up his mind about her.

Mothrydho's strongest lexical links with Beowulf appear in lines 1937 and 1938, handgewrithene and mundgripe, literally translated as "twisted by hand" and "handgrip." Handgewrithene describes a deadly bond, waelbende (1.1936). Klaeber says handgewrithene "seems to be meant figuratively" (199), since Mothrydho probably manipulated the events "by hand" and did not literally forge deadly bonds. However, the other two uses of forms of writhan in the poem are decidedly literal: in 1.963-4 Beowulf literally twists Grendel to his deathbed (Ic hine hraedlice heardan clammum / on waelbedde writhan thohte) and in 1.2982 the Geats, presumably including Beowulf, bind up the wounds and the corpses on the Swedish and Geatish battlefield (Da waeron monige, the his maeg wridhon).

Here, forms of writhan associate Mothrydho with Beowulf in instances where he is heroic (conquering Gren-

del, assisting his wounded comrades) and she is evil. Of course words have different connotations in different narratives, but the lexical association with the hero and his actions questions two usual critical assumptions: first, of Mothrydho's all-encompassing evil and, second, of a figurative translation of handgewrithene. Since Beowulf the noble hero is also associated with forms of writhan, the use of the word in the Mothrydho passage clouds a reading of her as a pure termagent. The other uses in the poem are literal; why must the word be translated figuratively here? Mothrydho, the queen with the ambiguous motives and character, could indeed forge or twist deadly bonds: literally put the men to death herself.

A similar problem with literal and figurative translations arises with the other word that associates Mothrydho and Beowulf: mundgripe (1.1938), both a clear link from Mothrydho to Beowulf and one of the most ambiguous words in the section. Mundgripe occurs only in *Beowulf* (Venezky, fiche M023, 164); there are no other usages in the Old English corpus that might guide us to a wider interpretation of the word. Beowulf is the only other character in the poem associated with mundgripe, twice in the fight with Grendel and once in the fight with Grendel's mother:[10]

> 1.379-81: he thritiges manna maegencraeft on his mundgripe heathorof haebbe (Beowulf has the strength of 30 men in his handgrip)

> 1.751-3: he ne mette middangeardes, eothan sceata on elran men mundgripe maran (Grendel has not met any man with a stronger handgrip than Beowulf)

> I.1533-4: strenge getruwode, mundgripe maegenes (Beowulf rejects Hrunting for handgrip in the fight with Grendel's mother)

While it is easy to translate mundgripe in these instances, scholars have had much more trouble with it in relation to Mothrydho. Klaeber says that it could be "an allusion to a fight between maiden (or father) and suitor" (199) but prefers instead to translate it as "seized" or "arrested."

Similarly, Constance Hieatt refers to it as "the method she uses, presumably by proxy, to pin down her victims" (177, italics mine); Jane Chance translates mundgripe as "arrest" (105), Helen Damico as "hand-seizure" (46). If there is bodily contact, Klaeber suggests maybe the father is involved (though he gives no reason at all for this speculation); Hieatt assumes that Mothrydho would not engage in physical contact with the men who dared to look at her.

Perhaps they do not want to think of actual contact between Mothrydho and her suitors. Even though the word is literal in reference to Beowulf the hero and his good deeds, it is assumed to be figurative when referring to a woman and her bad deeds. Hieatt does remark on the link between Mothrydho and Beowulf through the word:

Elsewhere, this word is associated with Beowulf alone, and its use here may be an indication of the misuse of strength and power in contrast to Beowulf's own exemplary use, recalling the contrast between Beowulf and Heremod.

(177)

Contrast or no, mundgripe associates Mothrydho with the hero just as writhan does, and those associations suggest—but do not confirm—literal uses of the word in the Mothrydho story as well.

And what is the story of Mothrydho? The associations of these two words (which link Mothrydho to Beowulf) enable us to acknowledge and play with ambiguities rather than to resolve or eliminate them. Is Mothrydho really evil? did she wrestle with men? did her father pack her off to Offa? does she illustrate an antitype of peace weaver? is she an Eve figure who becomes a Mary figure? The ambiguities in the text show that Mothrydho cannot be dismissed as simply another example, albeit extreme, of a tamed shrew.

This ambiguity surrounding Mothrydho forces an examination of the construction of gender in the poem. After all, the usual assumption of Modthrydho's wickedness is that she has repudiated the conventional female role of passive peaceweaver and taken matters of violence, best left to men, into her own hands. The traditional view of the passive peace pledge complements the traditional view of the active hero in this male/female opposition. Within this opposition, power belongs to the masculine. Except for Mothrydho, only men have the power of violence and the power of wealth in the social systems described in *Beowulf* Overing points out that "female failure is built into this system" since women "embody . . . peace, in a culture where war and death are privileged values" (82). Men have the opportunity to succeed, while the most a woman can hope for is to delay the inevitable war and failure of her role as peace weaver. However, for Overing this tidy opposition of active, warlike man/passive, peaceful woman is actually disrupted by the feminine, which drives a "wedge of ambiguity and paradox" into the neat pairs (xxiii). While Overing discusses the other female characters in the poem as well, she highlights Mothrydho because "she escapes, however briefly, the trap of binary definition" (108).

Mothrydho, in the first half of her story—and in the second half, though less obviously—not only disrupts the construction of gender in the poem but manages to take control of it briefly. This control both comes from and produces the power she wields. Mothrydho has the ultimate power, that of life and death, over the men in her hall. This power is masculine in terms of the gender construction of the text; those who wield power are men, like Beowulf or Higelac, and those who are

completely powerless are women, like Hildeburh or Freawaru. Although Hieatt thinks that Mothrydho's linguistic associations with Beowulf serve as a contrast involving the use and misuse of power, Mothrydho's lexical associations with Beowulf underscore the masculinity of her actions. Because she is wielding power as she arranges the deaths of the men who have offended her, she is constructing her gender, and that gender, within the terms of the poem, is masculine. Mothrydho is making an absolute, masculine statement, in Overing's terms, but with an interesting twist: You will not look at me or you will die.

As I noted earlier, Butler says that the construction of gender is an ongoing, repetitive, and circular process that builds upon itself: "'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (*Trouble* 17). In these terms, it is usual to assume that Mothrydho is evil (as Hieatt does) since she is acting against the usual assumptions about females in Anglo-Saxon literature (and perhaps in late twentieth century Western culture as well). Butler remarks that

> To the extent that the "I" is secured by its sexed position, this "I" and its position can be secured only by being repeatedly assumed, whereby "assumption" is not a singular act or event, but, rather, an iterable practice.
>
> (*Bodies* 108, emphasis Butler's)

Butler also emphasizes that gender is constructed by the discourse that contains it. To use Butler's examples, "the feminine" refers to very different ideas in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig or, more strikingly, of Plato and Luce Irigaray. Simply because Anglo-Saxon scholars have always discussed the feminine gender in terms of passive peace pledges and a Mary/Eve opposition is no reason to continue to do so. We can view Mothrydho's gender as masculine, a gender she has the power to construct on her own. As Butler says, "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (*Trouble* 25). Mothrydho's assumed and repeated performances, her citations (to use Butler's terms), are masculine.

To say that Mothrydho has constructed a masculine gender for herself is to say that she acts, within the textually constructed world of *Beowulf,* like a man. To borrow a phrase from Allen Frantzen, Mothrydho is a "manly woman" because her actions, her performances within the text, are masculine (460). Butler says, "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (*Trouble* 136). Viewed in this light, Mothrydho's gender is determined not by the author calling her a cwen, a queen (a noun feminine in grammatical gender as well definition),[11] but by her violent, authoritative, and powerful action.

While critics have not wanted to consider the possibility of literal contact between Mothrydho and men, a masculine construction of gender allows, even encourages that interpretation. If Mothrydho is masculine, why should she not attach waelbende (deadly bonds) to those who have offended her, literally put them in chains with her own hands? This would not be a feminine action, according to the text's definition of femininity, but I read Mothrydho to construct her own gender, to assume power that is unfeminine within the context of the poem. In doing so, she "reveals a trace of something that we know cannot exist in the world of the poem: the trace of a woman signifying in her own right" (Overing 106). To achieve power, Mothrydho has had to assume the masculine gender, for her society does not permit the feminine to put offenders in chains and cut their heads off.

The culture of the poem defines Mothrydho by her biological sex, sees her as feminine; her assumption of the masculine gender defines her deeds as firen' ondrysne, a terrible crime in her society. The ambiguity of her gender and her sex seeps into the poet's narrative. Modthrydho is evil but also fremu (excellent); she performs leodbealewa (harms to people) but is also aenlicu (peerless). The poet cannot condemn her completely with his language, though he sometimes presents her (and critics have read her) as an example of a bad woman.

Indeed, in the beginning of her story Mothrydho is a bad woman if considered within the gender-related values determined in the larger framework of the poem. Mothrydho does not even have a legitimate reason, in masculine terms, for killing the gazers, because she is not avenging the death of a kinsman. For Mothrydho, there is no reliance on "the familiar and familial vengeance code that pervades the poem" (Overing 105); although her actions show a masculine gender, the motives behind them do not. This sexual ambiguity (of her body, of her actions, of her intentions, of the language used to describe her) is too much for the narrative to bear, and Mothrydho, after 13 lines of disruption (1931-1944), seems to settle down into a more obviously feminine gender. She has disrupted the masculine economy, the binary definition of gender, on which the poem and its culture depend.

That economy is one that depends on women being defined as commodities to be traded between and passed among men. In "Women on the Market," Irigaray states that "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (170). Butler has noted Irigaray's propensity to cite her philosopher-fathers not as "simple reiterations of the original, but as an insubordination" (*Bodies* 45). Irigaray's analysis of a male-based economy predicated on female exchange enacts Butler's claims that she cites insubordinately; in

this essay, Irigaray reveals and insists upon the necessity of female exchange between men to what Butler would term the phallogocentric, heterosexual economy. While Anglo-Saxon England or early medieval Scandinavia may not be "the society we know," it is markedly similar in that an even more obvious exchange of women formed its basis. Freawaru and Hildeburh are traded like commodities to their families' enemies to buy an alliance, a tenuous peace. Irigaray says, "Woman has value only in that she can be exchanged" (176, italics hers); a woman is not an independent, signifying subject. Irigaray could be counseling Hrodhgar when she says, "Wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men" (172). Hrodhgar's wife, Wealtheow, his daughter, Freawaru, and his unnamed sister ("Healfdane's daughter") are all products in the masculine peace-pledge economy, traded for political alliance. Overing points out that women in Beowulf are so thoroughly objectified that most of them do not have names: of the eleven women in the poem, only five are named (Wealtheow, Freawaru, Higd, Hildeburh, Mothrydho); the rest remain nameless (the old woman at Beowulf's funeral) or are defined simply as a man's wife, mother, or daughter (73).

Irigaray points out that within this masculine economy a woman is worthless unless at least two men are interested in exchanging her (181). Mothrydho's marriage could be viewed in this light; she goes to Offa's hall be faeder lare, by father-counsel (1950). Lare could be translated here to mean an order of her father rather than advice;[12] Mothrydho seems to acquiesce to the masculine economy that defines her society and thus is exchanged between two men. In Irigaray's terms, Mothrydho could be read to have subscribed to society's version of normal womanhood, "a development that amounts, for the feminine, to subordination to the forms and laws of masculine activity" (187).

However, Mothrydho does rebel against that economy, especially in the first half of her story, when she performs within the masculine gender. Within the first thirteen lines of her narrative, she refuses to become a commodity like those defined in Irigaray's essay. Overing emphasizes that Mothrydho will not allow the men in the hall—presumably potential husbands—to gaze at her. While most women are commodities, "the gold-adorned queens who circulate among the warriors as visible treasure" (Overing 104), Mothrydho refuses to become one. "At the center of Mothrydho's rebellion is her refusal to be looked at, to become an object" (Overing 103). While Overing attributes Mothrydho's rebellion to her momentary disruption of the social and textual structures of *Beowulf,* I prefer to interpret Mothrydho more specifically as an active subject who has constructed her own gender. Her masculine gender both allows and forces her to be an active subject; thus, she

cannot be an object. Mothrydho has the power to rebel, to refuse, since she has assumed the masculine gender.

Her refusal of commodification points even more strongly to literal readings of handgewrithene and mundgripe; the implications of bodily contact show the physical nature of the way the men wanted to view her and she refused to be viewed. Since Mothrydho performs within a masculine gender, we can now read the passage as a story of a queen who bound and decapitated with her own hands those men who offended her.

The literal translation of mundgripe allows even another interpretation of the story, and I wish to allow for a multiplicity of interpretations and acknowledge that version as well. While all critics assume that the mundgripe is probably figurative (even Overing translates it as "seizure" (p. {104}) and either Mothrydho's or her father's, I would argue that the mundgripe is not only literal but could be the offending man's. This interpretation calls for a translation of aefter (aefter mundgripe, 1.1938) as "on account of" or "because of": because of an actual physical handgrip (a man touching or grasping this powerful woman), the sword was appointed. In this reading, Mothrydho has the power to refuse to be touched as well as looked at, which in Irigaray's terms rejects both the culture's definitions and commodifications of women. Irigaray says that woman has two bodies, "her natural body and her socially valued, exchangeable body" (180); in this version of the story, Mothrydho will not allow the men to touch her natural body nor to look at her as "visible treasure" to be socially exchanged.

The poet does not see the situation as a woman asserting her right not to be looked at and possibly touched: he refers to the men's actions as "pretended injury" (ligetorne, 1.1943). Ligetorne is unique in Old English to Mothrydho's story (Venezky, fiche L011,201); the narrator needs an unusual word, a compound of "lie" and "trouble" to emphasize that the actions of men concerning women's bodies are not injuries in the terms of the culture to which the men are accustomed.[13] Critics have tended to agree with the poet that these injuries are pretended; Edward Irving says "it is evident that these men are innocent victims of her accusations" (73). Evident? to whom? Perhaps to another man, within or without the text, who sees nothing wrong with examining the possible merchandise, as it were. Herein lies Mothrydho's ultimate disruption: she refuses to agree that the actions of the men are ligetorne and wields her power to punish the offenders.

However, it is generally agreed that Mothrydho changes into a more conventional Anglo-Saxon woman upon her marriage to Offa. Since she has been given to Offa, the poet tells us, the ale drinkers tell a different story; Mo-

thrydho lives well on the throne, good and famous, loving her husband (11.1945-1953). Traditional critics call her change a reform: Mothrydho has become more like Hygd, the traditional gold-adorned queen. Feminist critics seem a bit saddened by the passing of the man-killer and the assumption of the traditional role; even Overing says that Mothrydho rebels against but does not conquer the masculine symbolic order (105). Overing attributes her "reformed wifely personality" to the flaw in her rebellion, namely that "the violent form of her rebellion confronts the system on its own death-centered terms" (105). However, I want to argue that Mothrydho not only disrupts the masculine symbolic order but continues to rebel against it even after her disappearance from her own story.

It is easy to see Mothrydho as a conventional woman, silent and passive at the end of her story. The traditional view sees Mothrydho sent to Offa be faeder-lare as a gold-adorned peace pledge. After three and half lines (1951b-1954) praising her as a good, traditional queen, the poet moves on to praise her husband and does not mention Mothrydho again. She has disappeared from a story which is supposedly hers. Her body disappears as well as her name; her son Eomer is born not from her but thonon (1.1960), from him, i.e. from Offa. There is no need to mention the passive woman who does her duty as gold-adorned, fertile queen.

However, after her marriage to Offa, Mothrydho may not be the conventional gold-adorned queen that she seems to be on the surface. Close examination of the description of her life at Offa's court shows her unconventionality in a continued "rebellion" against the binary oppositions that defined her as virago and now as passive peace weaver. First of all, although she went be faeder lare, she gesohte, sought, Offa's hall. I choose to translate lare as "advice," without the authority-laden translation of "order,"[14] so that considering advice from her father, Mothrydho actively sought (journeyed to) Offa's hall. Once there, she is in gumstole, on the throne, not walking among the warriors serving them drink; the tableaux shows her in the place of power, not in the position of servitude.[15] She is described as maere (famous) in line 1952, an adjective normally reserved for (male) heroes.[16] These words all hint that Mothrydho is not the typical queen the critics have taken her to be after her marriage.

Most important, however, is her success in marriage. Mothrydho rebels against the system by succeeding in its terms, terms that are (as Overing points out) set up to ensure women's failure within patriarchal society.[17] In a society that values war, killing, violence, and glory in battle, the peace-weaver actually strives against everything the society values. The other women in *Beowulf*, as numerous critics have noted, fail, as indeed they are destined to do. Wealtheow fails to prevent her