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“Ic þæt secgan mæg, hwæt ic yrmþa gebad”: Christian Scribes’
Condemnation of Blood Feud and its Effect on Women in Anglo-Saxon Society

by

Tara Seate-Beck

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

Department of English and Modern Languages



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INTRODUCTION:

*Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
 minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg
 hwæt ic yrmþa gebad siþþan ic up weox
 niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.
 A ic wite wonn minra wræcsiþa. (ll. 1-5)*

[I make this song myself full sad/my lonely journey. I
 may say/that the miseries I endured as I grew up/ new and old,
 were not worse than now./Always I suffer the torture of my exile.¹]

These opening lines of *The Wife's Lament* reflect the grief and anguish suffered by women whose lives were forever disrupted and destroyed by the Anglo-Saxon custom of blood feud. As the most common legal practice among the Anglo-Saxons, blood feud was a systematic policy of retributive justice. Within this warrior society, brutality and violence were understood and necessary customs. Without the institution of a united centralized government (ca. AD 420—1066), the various Anglo-Saxon kingships governed themselves, and as a result the *wergild*, or “man-price,” was both a sanctioned precept and written law in Anglo-Saxon culture. Individual families sought justice for their clans and that justice was blood feud. No member of the kinship was left untouched by the consequences of the blood feud, and since these feuds were not limited to or governed strictly by laws of social status or agency, each tier of the Anglo-Saxon social hierarchy participated in and suffered from them. Blood feud challenged the very domestic structure of the Anglo-Saxon kinship; families suffered from both the loss of

their men to blood feud vengeance and the resulting social and political unrest wrought by it. Women in particular were victims of the blood feud. While not necessarily waging a vendetta of their own, women were frequently enmeshed in their clan's customs of retaliation. Whether suffering from a husband's involvement in blood feud, or being given in marriage as a peace-pledge to absolve or negate blood feud, women were forced into their kinship's vengeance.

As a primeval custom of pagan culture, blood feud stood as a threat to the newly Christianized Anglo-Saxon society of the late sixth century as the old pagan convention of revenge challenged the new Christian theology of forgiveness. Missionaries and monks, like the much revered Wulfstan, used the Anglo-Saxons' pagan traditions as paradigms of sin in their sermons and exempla, and instances of blood feud were forever preserved with the translation of Anglo-Saxon poetry by Christian scribes eager to condemn the culture's pagan conventions. As a result, the custom of blood feud and its ramifications, especially for women, resonate within Anglo-Saxon literature, emerging as one of the most commonly recognized tropes and criticisms of the society. In particular, poets recognized the victimization of women through their kinship's involvement in blood feud; wives became widows and mothers grieved the loss of their sons. By custom, Anglo-Saxon women lived under the guidance and protection of men; when their men died in blood feud, women were then left unprotected and vulnerable. In preserving and adapting Old English texts, Christian poets therefore also preserved the sorrowful condition of women that resulted from blood feud. Poems such as *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and the epic *Beowulf* give voice to the female victim while exhibiting and castigating the Anglo-Saxon blood feud tradition. Collectively these

poems stand as testament to the strife endured by women in Anglo-Saxon society because of their men's participation in blood feud as well as the futility of the feuds themselves. In each poem, a female voice emerges in a time when women had limited power and agency. The female voice and sorrow in these poems are a harsh criticism of the Anglo-Saxon society and the practice of blood feud; this unusual perspective lends validity to the criticism of the Christian scribe.

In the early decades of the fifth century, bands of Germanic invaders seized the opportunity to take control of British soil. With the departure of Roman forces, the coasts of England were at once vulnerable to assault, and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes arrived in droves, eager to assume authority of the land (Crawford 4; 8). Defenseless after the Roman evacuation, native Britons were no match for the Germanic warriors bent on claiming fertile British land. While the natives did at first resist invasion, they were not able to ultimately defend themselves against assault of the Germanic tribes.

According to Stephen Greenblatt, "The Anglo-Saxon occupation was no sudden conquest but extended over decades of fighting against the native Britons. The latter were, finally, largely confined to the mountainous region of Wales" (4). The invaders' earliest intention was merely to conquer, but soon after arriving in Britain, the Germanic bands settled into their own newly devised territories. As Sally Crawford writes in *Daily Life in Anglo-Saxon England*, "the people of Kent, the Isle of Wight and [...] part of Wessex [...] were Jutish, and the people of Essex (East Saxons), Sussex (South Saxons) and Wessex (West Saxons) were Saxon and came from that part of Germany known as Saxony, while the people of East Anglia, Middle Anglia, and Mercia, as well as Northumbria, came from a part of the Continent [...] called Angulus" (1). Crawford also

notes, “the incomers belonged to a pagan warrior society without a written culture, who brought with them [...] new settlement forms, a new lifestyle characterized by small, self-sufficient, localized farming communities with no evidence of complex hierarchies or administrative systems” (4). The living arrangements of the Anglo-Saxons were unique in that the people adapted so quickly to their new home while at the same time assimilating with it the traditions of their culture.

Kinships quickly established themselves in closely-knit settlements, founding these villages on the principles of barbarism and pagan belief. The men identified how British soil and climate differed from those of their homeland and acclimated farming rituals easily, successfully establishing farming communities among families. Since the Anglo-Saxons were an independent and self-reliant people, trade outside Britain was not necessary, though archeological evidence proves that trade existed among and between the various Anglo-Saxon territories themselves. Crawford explains that “even though trade routes may have been more local and restricted than under the [Roman] empire, Anglo-Saxon society produced surpluses, supported significant trading networks and had skilled craftsmen” (137). Since the people governed themselves and relied on their farmlands and trade for survival, blood feud disrupted these self-sufficient kinships and threatened to destroy their very structures as resources among tribes and clan groups were restricted by such violence.

The earliest Anglo-Saxon invaders did not possess a formal written language; in the simply-titled chronicle *The Anglo-Saxons*, James Campbell asserts that “the fifth-century Anglo-Saxons were illiterate and cannot have kept annals” (26). Though no written language existed, the Anglo-Saxons did have an oral tradition. While a handful

of kings' laws emerge from the annals of Anglo-Saxon society, the bulk of existing Anglo-Saxon history was not preserved through legal documents or law codes, nor through expansive registries and records. Though Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (AD 731) does provide a broad overview of Anglo-Saxon history, it is through the literature of the culture that scholars gain an introspective analysis of life in Anglo-Saxon England. Only an estimated thirty thousand lines of Old English poetry survive, but the extant texts reveal the social and political unrest of the Anglo-Saxon people, specifically in terms of blood feud. *Beowulf*, composed circa AD 750 and recorded circa AD 1000, and *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, included in *The Exeter Book*, compiled circa AD 972 (Black 24), permit scholars a close examination of the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. Two archetypal themes in particular reverberate within the lines of *Beowulf*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, as well as other texts of Old English literature: exile and blood feud. Both precepts meant potential, and probable, hardships for participants—both the willing and the wounded.

CHAPTER I: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND AND THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE PRESERVATION OF ITS LITERATURE

By the middle Anglo-Saxon period (AD 650-850), major shifts occurred within the conventions of the culture. As the needs of the people grew and changed, necessity gave rise to modifications in customs. According to Crawford, Middle Anglo-Saxon England:

Saw the emergence of competing kingdoms, accompanied by more elaborate social hierarchy; the establishment of elite and royal residences; the creation of highly powerful and influential monastic communities; the dominance of the church in daily and political life; the expansion of local, regional and overseas trade; the introduction of an Anglo-Saxon coinage; and the rise of specialized places (*wics*) for manufacturing and trade. (10)

A major contributor to the changes in Anglo-Saxon tradition was the Christian conversion which began in the late sixth century, starting with the conversion of Kent by St. Augustine in AD 597 through the influence of Queen (and later Saint) Aldeberge (AD 539-c. 612), wife of King Æthelbert of Canterbury (c. AD 560-616). Though the conversion was in part an assimilation of ancient tradition incorporated with the new Christian dogma, Christianity introduced novel social conventions and altered the priorities of the Anglo-Saxons. Christianity challenged the traditional warrior culture, prompting peace in its place; allegiance to one Lord unified the Anglo-Saxons, bonding all warriors in a common purpose. The middle Anglo-Saxon period (AD 650-850) also

witnessed the dawn of education as monasteries and abbeys were constructed in each major province, beginning first with a major religious center at Canterbury (Campbell 50). Monastic orders in Anglo-Saxon England were established to both train converts in the word of God and to preserve the oral literary tradition of the culture into handwritten documents. Overall, Christianization occurred quickly and with little protest from the Anglo-Saxon people, and within a matter of centuries, certain Anglo-Saxon provinces were hailed as Christian capitals. In *Anglo-Saxon Christianity*, Paul Cavill argues that “by the middle of the eighth century, Northumbria was the powerhouse of Christianity in Europe outside Rome. England was now sending its missionaries out to Germanic territories on the Continent and elsewhere” (16). Within only three hundred years, the very framework of Anglo-Saxon doctrine and theology had significantly changed, adapting to the new principles of Christianity.

In AD 597, the missionary Augustine, a native of Canterbury, arrived on Anglo-Saxon soil via a directive of Pope Gregory I. His purpose was to set in motion a mass movement that would forever change the course and development of western history. Crawford notes that though “the earliest Anglo-Saxons settling in England would have come into contact with Christianity through the pockets of surviving Romano-British Christians,” it was not until Augustine arrived that Christianity achieved the momentum necessary for a mass conversion; Crawford argues that since Augustine’s mission was sanctioned by the pope, it held more authority than any mere surviving “pocket” of Romano-British influence (174). The task before Augustine was of great magnitude and risk: convert to Christianity the heathen Germanic tribes that had barbarically attacked and settled in England. Unfamiliar with the people and the culture, Augustine ventured

first to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent, at that time under the lordship of King Æthelbert. Having heard rumor that Æthelbert had married a Christian princess, Augustine believed Kent would be the most accessible and least resistant territory in which to begin his mission. Having been already introduced to Queen Aldeberge's religious practices, Christianity was not altogether a new concept for Æthelbert. Cavill asserts, "The missionaries [...] made an impression of power and authority with their standard and image. However little Æthelbert had investigated his wife's faith, he knew, of course, that her relatives were powerful people, and that they owed allegiance to Rome" (18-19). Cavill also argues that "Æthelbert was the one who was afraid" in terms of the king's meeting with Augustine's entourage; the queen's prominence and her family's political agency were revered. Æthelbert quickly converted himself, and thus his kingdom, to Christianity.

Within the scope of a few short but crucial decades, the majority of Anglo-Saxon England was Christianized. Pagan temples were transformed into Christian churches; idols of the old tradition were replaced with roods. Weapons that once bore the inscriptions of allegiance to the Norse gods were now embellished with biblical scriptures, lamenting the crucifixion of Christ. The warrior culture transitioned from paganism to Christianity with relative fluidity. If Pope Gregory had predicted resistance from the natives because of their notoriety as a combatant people, he must have been quite pleasantly surprised by the veritable success of his mission. Cavill argues, "It may seem strange that a society which had institutionalized warfare should have undergone a bloodless conversion. But it was so. In fact, it was relatively easy for those brought up with an ethic of loyalty to a human lord to understand and translate that loyalty into a

spiritual principle. Loyalty to one's lord becomes loyalty to the Lord" (43). Outside of familial ties, thane/lord relationships, the famed *comitatus*, were regarded as the most precious bonds of the Germanic culture.

The *comitatus* was a warrior's pledge of unyielding fealty to his lord. This thane/lord relationship transcended most other relationships of the Anglo-Saxons and was a well established custom of the Germanic tribes. In *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation*, James C. Russell highlights the prominence of *comitatus* and refers to it as an aspect of the warrior ethic, identifying it as a "distinguishing feature of early medieval Germanic society" (118). As blood feud was a deeply rooted custom, so too then was the *comitatus*, and just as blood feud continued its permeation of Anglo-Saxon daily life after the settlement in Britain, so too did the bonds of *comitatus* continue among warriors and lords. As tribes assumed authority of British soil in the early fifth century AD and settled into individual provinces, the *comitatus* tradition survived and thrived in Anglo-Saxon England.

According to Stephen S. Evans in *The Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark Age Britain*, "A warrior's most important obligation was to fight his lord's battles so that fame and glory [...] could be obtained by lord and warrior alike. The lord's task was to fight for victory, while the warrior's was to fight for his lord" (56). Evans further illustrates *comitatus* by explaining that for the Anglo-Saxons, following one's lord into battle was the greatest of honors. He asserts, "In battle, a warrior was expected to fight and slay the enemies of his lord, to protect his lord to the best of his abilities, and to avenge his death in the event the lord was killed. In heroic poetry, a

warrior was expected to fulfill these battlefield duties even at the cost of his own life” (57). Evidence of the *comitatus* principle is demonstrated perhaps best in Old English’s character of Wiglaf. In *Beowulf*, Wiglaf is the only one of Beowulf’s men who remembers the code of *comitatus* during the elderly king’s battle with the dragon. When the other men run from the dragon in fear and leave Beowulf to battle it alone, Wiglaf proudly and valiantly honors the *comitatus* and stands with his lord in battle, willing to die if necessary to protect his king and ensure one last glory for his lord. The warrior’s obligation to fight for his lord’s fame and glory strikingly paralleled Christians’ obligation to expand and obtain fame and glory for their Lord in continuing the conversion and spreading Christianity. To die willingly and unselfishly for one’s lord became the willing sacrifice to do battle for, and die for, the Lord; going into battle for a lord became winning souls and spreading the conversion for the Lord, defeating those who opposed Him. Thus, for the Anglo-Saxons, a relationship with God was analogous to *comitatus*. Pledging an unyielding and unwavering promise to serve God was held in the same reverent manner with which warriors had once vowed allegiance to earthly lords.

With Christianity, all Anglo-Saxons now worshipped and paid allegiance to the same Lord; in so doing, the bonds among kinsmen and between separate kinship groups strengthened as the people themselves felt like a more cohesive unit. Other parallels between the new religion and the old Germanic traditions contributed to the swift adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon people to Christianity. In “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England,” William A. Chaney argues that similarities between paganism and Christianity facilitated the conversion; he notes the “parallels of Heaven and Valhöll”

(Valhalla) and “Hell and the Germanic regions of Niflhel” (Nifelheim) as key factors in the Anglo-Saxons’ passive acceptance of Christianity. These were similar concepts to the old religion and offered a sense of comfort and familiarity for converts. Chaney keenly observes that “a violent conversion to the new religion was unnecessary when the old provided so many parallelisms that the tribal culture could absorb the conquering God without disrupting many of its basic preconceptions” (208-209). In terms of the Anglo-Saxons’ readily made acceptance of Christianity, the state of daily living during the late sixth and early seventh centuries is considered. Cavill notes, “the appeal of Christianity to people whose lives were nasty, brutish, and short [...] must be that Christianity offered all kinds of culture and literacy, an alternative ethic and authority for life, help for life’s difficulties and hope for what was beyond” (51). Protracted violence and the continued decentralization of government weighed heavily on kinships, especially those embroiled in feuds. But, with the advent of new faith comes new perspective, and with Christianity came a possibility for the cessation of the blood feud tradition of the Anglo-Saxon people.

Just as blood feud and exile often serve as counterparts, so too do theology and education often survive in coexistence. As long as monasteries have been established centers for religion, they have just as long been centers for literacy and learning. Because of the fear that literate converts would form their own biblical interpretations and question the Church’s teachings, the Church initially restricted the spread of literacy. However, since the ability to read and write were fundamental to the success of expanding the Christian empire, as was understanding the history of those converted, monastic orders carefully trained their monks to dutifully transcribe cultural texts. As

Crawford asserts, “By the later Anglo-Saxon period, there were certainly secular readers and scribes, but the majority of the surviving written sources were created within monastic scriptoria, the writing factories of the time. The very concept of the written word was intimately connected to Christianity” (154). According to Goldwin Smith in *A History of England*, it was the Church that founded schools and libraries in the newly Christianized England (17). Thus the translations of Old English literature and the scant Anglo-Saxon surviving written records were primarily the products of Christian monks in those scriptoria. Cavill asserts, “All Old English poetry is in some sense Christian poetry, but not all of it is religious poetry [...] from the time of the conversion onwards, writing was the province [...] of the Church. Thus [...] the Church [...] did determine very effectively what was preserved for posterity” (127). A primary function of the Church was to preserve Anglo-Saxon literature, thus all Old English works are Christian to a degree, whether religious in theme or heroic—or, as in *Beowulf*, a combination of Christianity and the heroic warrior world. *Beowulf* is a heroic poem, set in a pagan past, and told by a Christian poet.

Christian scribes influenced Old English literary translations in two specific ways: first, by including Christian and biblical influences in texts, and second, through the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) condemnation of pagan rituals—specifically the precept of blood feud. The extant *Beowulf* text is a prime example of both. The *Beowulf*-poet blatantly links Grendel to Cain, weaving the biblical account of Genesis into the text, while at the same time subliminally obscuring his own opinion on blood feud inside a diatribe delivered through the character of Beowulf himself. The poet makes clear reference to God, proclaiming God is “Drihten...nē hīe hūru heofena Helm herian ne

cūþon wuldres Waldend” [“Lord...head of heaven and high king of the world”] (*Beowulf*, ll. 181-183). A mere seventeen lines before this passage, the *Beowulf*-poet castigates Grendel’s blood feud against the Danes.

While many aspects of the Anglo-Saxon pagan warrior culture were attacked by Christian scribes, the most reviled of the non-Christian traditions is that of blood feud. For a faith whose canon is based on peace and brotherly love and founded on commandments such as “Love thy neighbor” and “Thou shalt not kill,” Christianity is disrupted and consumed within the parameters of blood feud vengeance. As Richard Fletcher pointedly asserts in *Bloodfeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England*, “Peace was not the natural order of [Anglo-Saxon] society [...] it was a social condition that had to be brought about, had to be made, and like all human constructs, peace was frail” (10). The infirmity of peace was a fundamental concern of early Anglo-Saxon Christians; Fletcher continues, “Regrettable though this might have been to high-minded churchmen, it was a fact of life that violence and conflict were as much a part of the social order as was peace” (10). Recognizing the conflict caused by feud in his own time, Jesus addresses the issue of feud with his disciples at the Sermon on the Mount.

In the sermon, Jesus identifies retribution as a sin, condemning its practice and calling for peace instead in its place. The Gospel of Matthew records the Sermon on the Mount and the words of Christ on reprisal as, “‘You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you [...] If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the left also’” (*The Holy Bible*, Matthew 5.38-40). Jesus is not stating that Christians should simply accept injustices and harm inflicted on them by others. Instead, he is clarifying and even negating earlier Mosaic law, which called for swift and

immediate retribution. Mosaic law demands that, according to the Book of Exodus, “If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise” (*The Holy Bible*, Exodus, 2.23-25). As the “eye for an eye” concept originally appeared in Mosaic custom, retributive violence, when equitable, was deemed culturally acceptable. Blood feud, too, was deemed culturally acceptable by the Anglo-Saxons insomuch that it was equitable as well—one life taken for one life. However, as mimetic violence viciously reoccurred with no cessation, the purpose of vengeance failed. In *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asserts, “The Old Testament statement ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’ [...] was made to the children of Israel by Moses [...] to control excesses [...] to control anger and violence and the desire for revenge” (239). Moses imposed the “eye for an eye” edict to limit and prevent the incessancy of cyclical violence and the compulsion of humanity to continue exacting revenge. In the law he warned against excess and exacting a revenge-price that was too great, exceeding the proscribed legal allowances of retribution. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard states, “Religion instructs men as to what they must and must not do to prevent a recurrence of destructive violence” (259). Blood feud, though a pagan practice, seemed to follow this Old Testament creed and also to reinforce Girard’s arguments. Established to ensure justice but to also prevent excess, blood feud was often protracted and exceeded and violated its very principles.

Though only approximately thirty-thousand lines of Old English literature survive, a considerable number of these lines are attributed to Wulfstan, who once served as archbishop of York and bishop of Worcester. His greatest sermon, often dubbed as

Wulfstan's Address to the English People (Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos Quando Dani Maxime Persecuti Sunt Eos, Quod Fuit Anno Millesimo XIII Ab Incarnatione Domini Nostri Iesu Cristi), is a major reference point for studies in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Commonly referred to as "The Sermon of the Wolf," *Wulfstan's Address to the English People* was delivered circa 1014 (Whitelock 85). Wulfstan addressed the current, prevalent issues faced by the Anglo-Saxons of the early ninth century, focusing primarily on the Danish invasion. Despite the assaults, Anglo-Saxon England continued its move toward a more centralized government and fought to re-stabilize after the enemy attacks (only to fall in 1066). Since Christianity was a key means of uniting the independent territories and aiding them in rebounding after the invasions, Wulfstan's exempla focuses on both legal and moral principles faced by the people, recognizing the two not as separate entities but as one struggle.

In "The Wolf's Testimony to the English: Law and the Witness in the 'Sermo Lupiad Anglos,'" Andrew Rabin argues that "Wulfstan links law, homily, and testimony [...] closely together" (396). Rabin also asserts that "surviving Wulfstan manuscripts [...] conflate [law and morality] in a manner that characterizes the law not as a set of punitive regulations but as a means of rousing English subjects from moral turpitude and urging them toward a more Christian society" (391). Wulfstan addresses the people,

Lēofan men, gecnāwað þæt sōð is: ðēos worold is on ofste, and hit
nēalæcð þām ende, and þy hit is on worolde sa swā leng swā wyrse, and
swā hit sceal nyde for folces synnan ær Ante-crīstes tōcyme yfelian
swyþe, and hūru hit wyrð þænne egeslic and grimlic wide on worolde.
Understandað eac georne þæt dēofol þās þēode nū fela gēara dwelode tō

swyðe, and þæt lytle getrēowþa wæran mid mannum, þēah hy wel spæcan,
 and unrihta tō fela rīcsode on lande; and næs ā fela manna þe smēade
 ymbe þā bōte swā georne swā man scolde, ac dæghwāmlīce man īhte yfel
 æfter ðōðrum and unrīht rærde and unlaga manege ealles tō wīde gynd ealle
 þās þēode (ll. 1-11)

[Dear men, know that the truth is this: this world is in haste, and it approaches the end, and therefore, the world is always worse, and man's sins are Anti-Christ's coming soon, and truly then it will be widely awful and cruel in the world.

Understand also well that the devil has for many years led the people astray and that little loyalty was with men although they spoke well and were wicked in reigning the land; and man did not consider much about healing as well as man should, but daily man increased in evil after evil and wickedness was raised and injustice entirely spread to those served.^{2]}

Wulfstan clearly addresses the Anglo-Saxons' pagan past when he proclaims "þæt dēofol þās þēode nū fela gēara dwelode" [that the devil has for many years led the people astray]. Though Wulfstan does not blatantly label specific pagan conventions in the opening lines of his sermon, the subtle references to such customs still resound within his exempla. Wulfstan addresses the wicked actions performed under reigning lords—actions such as the retributive violence of blood feud and its permission under Anglo-Saxon law. Wulfstan identifies the social, legal, and theological issues incurred by such customs.

Like Wulfstan, the Christian poet of *Beowulf* denounces the persistence and prevalence of blood feud along with its social ramifications for women and the Anglo-

Saxon's culturally accepted gender expectations for women. While *Beowulf* features a compass of strong women, like Hrothgar's outspoken queen Wealhþeow and the much revered queen Hygd, Grendel's mother suffers from the injustices of the patriarchal warrior culture. The *Beowulf*-poet constructs Grendel's mother as a victim of a masculine world fueled by hostility, enmity, and uncertainty. She is a mother, alone and defenseless, void of companionship or protection, suffering as an outcast of her own society; she is a mother in agony over the murder and desecration of her only child. Her agony is the product of blood feud as ultimately her own demise will be as well. According to the poet, as an exile, Grendel's mother has been forsaken by her culture and God. As Helen T. Bennet argues in her chapter in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, "Just as the female Anglo-Saxon exiles could not gain security from the earthly conventional lord/thane relationship, so they cannot benefit from divine solace for the general human condition" (48). Therefore, in both life and death, these women suffer from an incurable exile; there is no escape, nor is there any sense of peace, comfort, or protection.

Grendel's mother is not the sole Anglo-Saxon literary example of a woman destroyed by blood feud; *Beowulf* has an underlying theme of blood feud represented by various female figures in the text, most of whom try to forestall those feuds through marriage alliance and through intelligent diplomacy: Wealhþeow, Freawaru, Hildeburh, Hygd, and even the tyrannous Modthryth, who is tamed by her marital alliance with King Offa and learns good and peaceful governance. Other women appear in some of the Christian poems of *The Exeter Book*, a treasury of maxims, elegies, riddles, and poems. What is strikingly unique about the lyrics of *The Exeter Book* is the emergence of female

voice. In most Anglo-Saxon texts, the female perspective is mute; only a select few women materialize from the literature of the culture. Though the female perspective is limited, it is not weak or submissive. Instead, the female voice in these lyrics is strong and assertive. The women address the issues of blood feud, exile, and the repercussions they suffer because of their culture's male participation in both. *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are elegiac works voiced by women who bewail the custom of blood feud and their victimization by it. In preserving this rare perspective, the Christian scribes present a critical sense of agency to Anglo-Saxon women challenging the systematic convention of blood feud.

CHAPTER II: THE ANGLO-SAXON BLOOD FEUD

Blood feud was a long practiced and even revered custom of the Anglo-Saxons; its eye-for-an-eye, bloodshed-for-bloodshed system of retributive justice both upset and maintained the balance of social order. Steeped in cultural tradition, the Anglo-Saxons continued to utilize blood feud after settling in Britain in the early fifth century. Since all families were considered equal in terms of blood feud, no one family could assume authority over another based on the terms of blood feud vengeance. However, just as blood feud reestablished order among disputing families, it also just as quickly disrupted the structure of individual kinships. Kinships rallied to replace fallen family leaders and to assume and perpetuate blood feud if necessary; the death of a kinsman often plunged his kin into a violent and volatile dispute with a warring clan, demanding immediate, and often continuous, justice and retribution.

In many cases, blood feud catapulted into a perpetuated conflict, quickly becoming a ceaseless dispute and resulting in devastating consequences for the clans involved. This mimetic violence counteracted the initial purpose of blood feud, as “an-eye-for-an-eye” seldom stopped there; cyclical violence was unleashed by feuding, and once loosened, vengeance was difficult to rein in. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard argues,

The only satisfactory revenge for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer [...] vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal [...] vengeance, then, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process.

Every time it turns up in some part of the community, it threatens to involve the

whole social body [...] the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal [...] the multiplication of reprisals instantaneously puts the very existence of a society in jeopardy [...] vengeance is a vicious cycle. (14-15)

Girard's arguments on the effects of reprisal in a society are based on surveys of primitive cultures, such as that of the Anglo-Saxons. Cycles, especially those involving violence, once begun, are difficult to break. In grief and anger, injured parties fail to acknowledge the principles of blood feud vengeance, as well as fail to acknowledge where true culpability lies. Girard asserts, "Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the last blow, and reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever being reached" (24). He also states emphatically that "as long as violence remains present among men, and as long as men pursue it as an absolute [...] it will continue its devastating oscillations" (151). Instances of mimetic, cyclical violence, then, once begun, are destined to spin invariably out of control, beyond the sanctioned parameters of a society. While blood feud was established as a systematic means of ensuring and sustaining social order and imposing strictures on behavior and relations between kinships, mimetic reprisals threatened its very purpose.

Family leaders were lost in the blood feud and families were often left fragmented, displaced, and vulnerable. Women left behind without male protection were especially susceptible victims of the blood feud. As murder beget murder, the conventions of blood feud often blurred, and cyclical (and reciprocal) violence plagued kinships. Centuries would pass before Augustine arrived on the Church's directive to

Christianize the kingdoms, thus leading to a more solid condemnation of the blood feud tradition.

With its deep Teutonic roots, blood feud was a deeply established custom. In “Feud and the State in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” Paul Hyams asserts that “feud was ‘a pillar central to Anglo-Saxon political culture’” (1). In “Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies,” Helen T. Bennett insists, “Anglo-Saxon society is organized for war. It depends, in fact, on war for the very survival of its structure” (44). In the case of a wrong or an insult, the *inflicted* in turn had not only the right but the social and legal obligation to *inflict*. Anglo-Saxon legal expert Hampton L. Carson writes, “The injured party took the law into his own hands. He was his own judge and his own avenger [...] in helping himself to his own share of justice, his sole conception of the wrong done was that it involved himself alone [...] he assumed and exercised judicial powers [...] and was his own executioner [...] he exacted blood for blood by virtue of the inherently sovereign power vested in himself as an individual” (649). Blood feud’s intention was to conciliate justice in a time when there was no central agency in which justice was maintained.

However, the cycle of retribution interfered with proper conciliation as proscribed by the rules of blood feud. Girard argues, “As long as there exists no sovereign and independent body capable of taking the place of the injured party and taking upon itself the responsibility for revenge, the danger of interminable escalation remains” (17). Without an independent, third-party body of neutrality to intervene in feud, blood feud perpetuates. Each family clan prided itself on the honor of its kinsmen and its warrior

heritage; an affront to the kinship web ignited blood feud vengeance—but revenge was not the sole contributing factor to the perpetuation of blood feud.

Fletcher argues, “Feud is not simply revenge, though the instinct of revenge underlies it. Revenge is a matter, essentially, for individuals and acts of revenge tend to take place in hot blood. It is of the essence of feud [...] that its prosecution is governed by accepted social conventions [...] most usually [by] kinsfolk” (8). Since centralized government did not exist in Anglo-Saxon England until King Alfred instituted a “national system of administration” (Crawford 15), individual kinships were their own governing bodies. In the compilation *Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400-1100*, Lisa M. Bitel asserts, “Legal retribution was one of the group’s most important functions because of the decentralization of early medieval governments” (159). In *The English Historical Review*, Frederick Pollock emphasizes the role of family in Anglo-Saxon law:

Anglo Saxon polity [was] [...] a time when not the individual, but the family or kindred, was the unit of the common weal, controlling its members [...] and answerable for them in matters of both public and private right. Such a stage of society [...] when it puts on the face of strife between hostile kindreds [...] is shown in the war of tribal factions, and more specifically in the blood feud. A man’s kindred are his avengers; and [...] it is their right and honour to avenge him. (244)

Pollock continues by likening kinship authority as a precursor to modern political infrastructures, asserting that “We have to conceive, then, of the kindred not as an artificial body or corporation to which the State allows authority over its members [...] but as an element of the State prior to the State itself” (244). If an Anglo-Saxon could

not exact blood feud vengeance for himself, it was not only the right but the legal duty of his kinsmen to avenge his death. An injury done to a man was an injury to his kinsmen as well. Continuing his illustration of blood feud, Carson explains that “If A killed B, B’s kinsmen sought to avenge his death. The kinsmen of A rallied to his support and a private war arose which could be strictly called feud” (651). Kinsmen served as judge, jury, and fundamentally, executioner in Anglo-Saxon England; blood ties persisted and ensured swift justice for their fallen kinsman. According to Joel T. Rosenthal in “Marriage and the Blood Feud in ‘Heroic’ Europe,”

Like so many other institutions of primitive society, the blood feud [...] was surrounded by rules, conventions, and traditions. The pursuit of the feud was made possible by the closeness of the kin group [...] drawing kin together and giving it a common purpose. In the absence of an articulated political apparatus, a government, there was no institution which combated [...] violence more effectively than did the family. (133-134)

Blood feud was utilized not only by kinships as a means of preserving justice but also as a means for obtaining, and maintaining, the balance of social order. Since blood feud was an imminent threat in Anglo-Saxon England, kinships felt the burden and ever-looming pressure of forced participation in exacting blood feud revenge. For a people whose heritage was steeped in violence and founded in bloodshed, peace was an idyllic goal; in a culture that existed for centuries with no centralized governing body, feuds therefore not only settled discrepancies between kinships but ultimately united those same kinships as well. In the epic *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar’s sister serves as a peace-pledge wife. The poet sings that Hrothgar’s sister ““wæs Onelan cwēn/Heaðo-Scilfingas

heals-gebedda” (ll. 62-63) [“‘was Onela’s queen/the Swedes balm in bed’”]. Hrothgar arranges the marriage of his own daughter, Freawaru, to a leader of a competing country in the hopes of maintaining a peaceful relationship and avoiding further provocations of blood feud. Hyams argues the necessity of violence in the culmination of peace, asserting,

Feud could [...] function as an instrument of positive social control. Fear of the violent retaliation feud requires could serve to deter men from homicides and other violent acts, or at least give them and their friends pause for thought. The high cost of reprisal [wergild] provided an incentive for those friends to dissuade the most violent men from acts for which they knew they too would in the end have to pay. (20)

Fear of consequence and violent repercussions dissuaded some potential blood feud participants. Witnesses to feuds and bitter memories of feuds were reminders of the sorrow and discord wreaked by blood feud vengeance. Thus blood feud could not only solve but also prevent further bloodshed. In “The Ecstasy of Vengeance: The Legal History, Old English Scholarship, and the ‘Feud’ of Hengest,” Stefan Jurasinski refers to blood feud as a “conventionally understood [...] means of preserving the peace” (644). The fear of feud was therefore necessary in seeking and establishing peace among warring or vulnerable families. Without the threat of blood feud, Anglo-Saxon kinships could co-exist in relative harmony.

In a study solely on the violence of *Beowulf*, Thomas L. Wymer and Erin F. Labbie cite not only the significance of violence to the context of the poem, but the sheer necessity of violence in reasserting and sustaining authority in the heroic culture. In

“Civilized Rage in *Beowulf*,” Wymer and Labbie observe that for the Anglo-Saxon culture, “War is as much a part of life as peace, and conflicts all too often can be settled only with violence. It is a world therefore in which the cultivation of the capacity for rage is both a necessity and a danger [...] a world in which the wise warrior [...] is obliged not only to restrain his rage, but also to call upon it at need” (14-15). The balance “restraining” yet “calling upon rage when necessary” was delicate and tenuous, but Beowulf exemplifies the ability to quell rage and submit to it when necessary. In all three definitive battles, Beowulf releases rage only as it is necessary; his violence is not gratuitous. He wields power and force into rage to defeat the enemy, and these actions occur only after the enemy has first initiated violence. Grendel attacks Heorot, Grendel’s mother kills Æschere, and the dragon terrorizes Geatland; it is only after these enemies have attacked first that Beowulf allows his rage to emerge as a means of reestablishing peace and order.

Old English scholar and *Beowulf* critic Eric Wilson delves further into the issue of necessary societal violence, arguing that violence is indeed the very foundation of civilization. Wilson investigates the Anglo-Saxon axiom of blood feud not for judicial purposes, but in terms of its collateral damage to the culture. In the critical analysis, Wilson attests:

Violence is born out of revenge. Once an act of violence, be it deliberate or accidental, is done in a civilization or culture, it must be requited by another act of violence. After a first violent death, another violent death must follow, for the only ‘satisfactory revenge for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer.’ Consequently, vengeance is ‘an interminable, infinitely repetitive process,’ one

which, once it has begun, threatens a ‘chain reaction’ of violence [...] violence is essentially mimetic; one act of violence is mirrored in an act of revenge, which in turn is mirrored by yet another vengeful act. (8)

While Wilson’s arguments seem at first to denounce customary violence, he continues in his disquisition to expound the integral role violence—exclusively blood feud violence—assumed in the formation of, and sustainability of, a society. He asserts that “Culture grew out of reciprocal violence” and that it was this same mimetic violence which ultimately established law and order (8), for the fear of violence, and more specifically its repercussions, functions as a social and behavioral deterrent.

The demand to exact vengeance and the recurrent cycle of bloodshed due to feud only fueled the social and political unrest in Anglo-Saxon England. For a kinship to fail in terms of blood feud vengeance meant embarrassment and reproach and signified weakness and vulnerability to other clans. However, families knew all too well the consequences of blood feud and sought methods of deterring further participation in blood feud violence. Rosenthal asserts that “In principle, the living had an obligation to their dead ancestors—though not always a welcome one—and from this obligation there was no honourable escape” (134). As blood feud escalated, its repercussions were felt by not only participating kinships but by neighbors and entire communities as well. In *Beowulf*, Grendel’s blood feud against Hrothgar permeates all of the kingdom; on his first trip to Heorot, Grendel murders “þrītig þegna” [“thirty men”] (l. 123); though Grendel’s blood feud is against Hrothgar, it is Hrothgar’s army, his thanes, and their families who suffer as a result of the feud. In *The Wife’s Lament*, it is the husband who is involved in

blood feud, but it is his abandoned wife who is forced into exile, suffering because of her husband's willingness to perpetuate the feud. Hyams concludes,

Feuding groups spread across communities, so that men had to face the prospect of being forced to fight kinsmen, colleagues, neighbors, and friends. Blood kin of the disputants might well find themselves confronting their own kinsmen by blood or marriage and so faced with what could be excruciatingly difficult choices [...] such 'cross-linkage' augmented the pressure for peaceful settlement. (20-21)

As families sought an ultimate and peaceful end to blood feud, only one solution emerged—marriage. Since family was the most intimate bond and family honor was the most significant aspect of Anglo-Saxon life, if individual kinships intermarried, not only would their central alliances strengthen, but warring families would unite as one. Kin would no longer need to seek vengeance against an enemy family; the two feuding clans would become one cohesive unit. In order for kinship webs to consolidate and harmonize, arranged marriages were contracted between them. Anglo-Saxon women were the bonding agents for such agreements, weaving threads of peace between the warring clans and attempting to dissolve ill sentiments. While some women voluntarily wed men from enemy clans to weave peace, other women were sold or bartered as commodities. Crawford asserts that Anglo-Saxon women often functioned as “social gifts” and that peace-pledge marriages were negotiated through a “bride price” which served as “sale of the woman” (85-86). While some women certainly incited blood feud, perpetuated them, or shunned association with feuds altogether, women in Anglo-Saxon England were largely considered as peaceweavers.

CHAPTER III: THE FUNCTION OF WOMEN AS PEACEWEAVERS IN ANGLO-SAXON CULTURE

A primary, though not solitary, function of women in Anglo-Saxon culture was that of peaceweaver. Women in Anglo-Saxon England were expected not only to establish but also to maintain bonds of peace among feuding kinsmen. Through marriage, women mended blood feuds and united warring families into a cohesive kinship group; in some cases, women were offered as peace-pledges between agreeable kinships in the hopes of preventing any future violence. Peaceweaver was a complicated role, requiring much attention and work on behalf of the woman; peace was difficult, and its responsibility was placed solely on the shoulders of Anglo-Saxon women. According to Bitel, women were “useful weapons in the fight for peace and order” (178). Rosenthal writes that “One of the prominent roles of a woman was, through her marriage, that of acting as feud-healer or alliance-binder. This use of marriage either to heal an open blood feud or to create an alliance as to prevent future feuds was an obvious and sensible policy” (133). *Beowulf* scholar Bernice Kliman echoes Rosenthal’s arguments, referring to such marriage arrangements “as the invisible solder which welds man to man” (33). This “invisible solder” was meant to strengthen the size and power of kinship groups while negotiating peace between warring families; in *Beowulf*, Hrothgar’s daughter Freawaru serves as a peace-pledge to unite Denmark with a potential enemy nation.

In the essay “Of Weavers and Warriors: Peace and Destruction in the Epic Tradition,” literary scholar Victoria Wodzak argues that “As a metaphor, weaving is pervasive and truly appropriate. The act of weaving draws together useless, disparate

threads through the exchanging, from side to side, of thread-laden shuttle, to produce a strong, durable, useful fabric. Thus we have weavers of tales, of plots, of fate, of peace” (256). Women were weavers of all kinds: they wove peace, they wove alliances, they wove kinship, and they both literally and figuratively wove the fabric of the society. In theory, a peace-pledge marriage was indeed a sensible and logical solution to the violence and tumult of blood feud, and since laws and ties of kinship were integral aspects of Anglo-Saxon life, marriages made to end blood feud were not merely viewed as an “easy out” for feuding families.

While some peace-pledge marriages no doubt successfully restored order and harmony among feuding families, such unions were seldom ideal. Rosenthal argues, “Women became [...] sacrificial victims to good but vain intentions” (133). Fletcher, too, asserts vehemently that “Marriage, let there be no misunderstanding about it, was a *business* for the two families concerned. It was not a matter of individual choice [...] girls of marriageable age were *pieces* [...] in a network of family relationships. Brides might [...] ‘weave peace’ between hostile kins. They might initiate or strengthen local alliances. They might consolidate a family’s relationship” (126). Fletcher’s repetitive use of the modal verb “might” is indicative of the intention, but of the ultimate futility, of peace-pledge marriages. Echoing Rosenthal’s commentary on Anglo-Saxon business-like marriages, Crawford writes, “Their marriages were a matter of political importance: a marriage negotiated between [...] families was often an extension of a political negotiation [...] for peace” (51). Such is the case of Hildeburh and Finn of *Beowulf*. Their ill-fated marriage has been arranged in accordance with their kinships’ objective to cease a longstanding and particularly destructive blood feud. Though the marriage is

sanctioned to lawfully bond together the feuding kinship groups, past grievances ultimately interfere with the union and negate the purpose of the peace-pledge marriage.

Old wounds and insults did not heal so easily, especially in cases of perpetuated blood feud. In the essay “Feuds in *Beowulf*: A Tragic Necessity,” Stanley J. Kahrl laments “that it is precisely as it destroys the future through its consequences that a feud is most awful” (191). Since Old English literature serves as the primary source for a historical synopsis of Anglo-Saxon England, the poetry of the culture reveals that peace-pledge marriages were practical only in theory. As blood feud was a protracted violence, generations of kinsmen suffered as victims of its brutality, enduring the consequences of previous kins’ involvement in feud while also experiencing firsthand strife in their own feuds. Through marriage bonds, brides were now forced to live among the slayers of their fathers, brothers, and uncles; brides were in turn unrelenting reminders of their own kin’s violent deeds.

When children, specifically sons, were produced within these peace-pledge unions, wives were forever linked with their kin’s murderers by blood. This is confirmed in the so-called “Finn and Hildeburh episode,” or the *Fight at Finnsburgh*, in *Beowulf*. After defeating Grendel, Beowulf is awarded the spoils of victory at a great feast at Heorot. A scop then regales the warriors with the tale of Finn, Hildeburh, and Hengest; it is a tale of blood feud, peace-pledge marriage, and ultimately consequence as Hildeburh is torn between her own kinsmen and those of her husband, suffering the loss of both her son and brother in the blood feud—one from one side of the familial conflict, but both tied to one woman.

Nē hūru Hildeburh herian þorfte

eotena trēowe; unsynnym wearð
 beloren lēofum æt þām lind-plegan
 bearnum ond brōðrum; hīe on gebyrd hruron
 gāre wunde; þæt wæs geōmuru ides.
 Nalles hōlinga Hōces dohtor
 meotodsceaft bemearn, syþðan morgon cōm,
 ðā heo under swegle gesēon meahte
 morþor-bealo māga [...]
 Hēt ðā Hildeburh æt Hnæfes āde
 hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan
 bān –fatu bærnan ond on bæl dōn.
 Earme on eaxle ides gnornode,
 geōmrode giddum. Gūð-rinc āstāh;
 wand tō wolcnum wæl-fyra mæst,
 hlynode for hlāwe; hafelan multon,
 bēn-geato burston, ðonne blōd ætspranc,
 lāð-bite līces. Līg ealle forswealg,
 gæsta gīfrost, þāra ðe þær gūð fornam
 bēga folces; wæs hira blæd scacen. (*Beowulf*, ll. 1070-1125)

[Hildeburh had little need to trust the Jutes; she, guiltlessly, had lost her beloved son and brother in the shield-play. She, burdened, they, spear-wounded; the lady lamented. Not in vain, Hoc's daughter lamented her fate. Afterwards morning came; then she among the brightness was able to see the violent death of her

son [...] Hildeburh commanded her own son's body be burned on Hnæf's pyre. A bone casket burning in the flame. Miserably the lady grieved. The battle warrior rose up to heaven. They stood around the burial mound and grieved. Heads burned, wound-gashes burst, then blood rushed forth from the wounded bodies. Fire flame wholly burned them both. The warriors proceeded forth. Her life had departed.^{3]}

Though she is married to Finn as a means of establishing peace between their disputing families, Hildeburh is instead the victim of their protracted blood feud vengeance; her intended function as peaceweaver has been in vain. Hildeburh's story is one of many that permeates the fabric of *Beowulf*, and the looming specter of blood feud and failed alliance is foreshadowed in the opening description of Heorot, which awaits a barbarous burning. As Bitel aptly notes, "Early medieval literati relentlessly probed the difficulties of married women who tried to balance their loyalties to husband [and] natal family. Though the English called such women [like Hildeburh] peaceweavers, their stories and poems more often depicted unsuccessful women whose families unraveled, rather than serene mothers knitting families together in amity" (182). Peace in such alliances was fleeting as past grievances reemerged again and again in the presence of the bride's company. The damages and suffering endured in blood feud were not so easily forgotten or ameliorated when peace-pledge marriages were constructed. Warriors felt betrayed in the presence of the enemy's female kin; knowledge that their king or fellow man was now indelibly linked to such bitter memories was a reproach to the very society

in which the Anglo-Saxons lived. Families could not easily accept a bride, knowing her father or brother or uncle was responsible for their very heartache and loss.

Resentment was a deeply rooted sentiment, and the bride became the target of such emotions from her husband's kin. She too felt her own resentment toward her new family as she was now forever linked, guiltily, to them, separated from the comfort and stability of her own kinship. Rosenthal notes,

In many instances recorded in the literature, marriage did not serve the envisaged function. Old feuds were rarely resolved; feelings ran too deep, and marriage [...] was not the way to placate them [...] the mere presence of the bride served as a constant rebuke to her in-laws, especially if they had not balanced the score of revenge before the marriage had been arranged [...] latent hostilities now had a point—the reception and treatment of the new bride. (135-136)

The presence of the bride was a constant reminder of the feud and the bloodshed and strife caused by it. Though by law she should now be considered a member of her husband's kin, by blood she was forever connected to her own family, and such blood ties could not be ignored. The *Beowulf*-poet observes the futility of peace-pledge marriages in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture in a speech given by Beowulf, lamenting the probable outcome of Freawaru's marriage to Ingeld:

‘Mæg þæs þonne ofþyncan ðēodne Heaðobeardna
 ond þegna gehwām þāra lēoda,
 þonne hē mid fæmnan on flett gæð
 dryht-bearn Dena, duguða biwenede.
 On him gladiað gomelra lāfe,

heard ond hring-mæl Heaðabeardna gestrēon,
 þenden hīe ðam wæpnum wealdan mōston,
 oððæt hīe forlæddan tō ðām lind-plegan
 swæse gesīðas ond hyra sylfra feorh.
 Þonne cwið æt bēore, sē þe bēah gesyhð,
 eald æsc-wiga, sē ðe eall geman
 gār-cwealm gumena -him bið grim sefa-
 onginneð geōmor-mōd geongum ceman
 þurh hreðra gehygd, higes cunnian,
 wīg-bealu weccan [...]
 Manað swa ond myndgað mæla gehwylce
 sārum wordum, oððæt sæl cymeð,
 þæt se fæmnan þegn fore fæder dædum
 æfter bille bite blōd-fāg swefeð.' (*Beowulf*ll. 2032-2060)

[The kinsmen will therefore be vexed joining Heathobards, and their lord and his
 thanes when he with that woman walks into the hall, noble Danes, being
 entertained. On them glisten regalia and bold ring-mail, the Heathobards'
 treasure. As long as they could wield weapons, until they bring up that battle,
 beloved comrades and their lives. When next a man speaks, an ancient spear-
 warrior who all in that company. Death by spear disregarded; his heart darkens,
 being sad-minded. Young warriors through their thoughts attempt to search.
 War-bale awakens [...] Recalling and accusing, marking someone; painful words,

until occasion approaches that the woman's thane because of her ancestors' deeds after sword's cut is bloody killed.^{4]}

On the surface, Beowulf's litany seems contradictory; as the epic's hero, he has, after all, sailed across the whale-road to assume Hrothgar's twelve-year blood feud with the monstrous Grendel. He voluntarily exacts feud vengeance for Hrothgar, even though Grendel's feud is not waged upon the Geats. When Grendel's mother exacts her own blood feud vengeance by claiming the life of the Dane Aeschere, as is her right, Beowulf must then assume a separate blood feud against her, taking her life as well. As a warrior, Beowulf understands the convention and consequence of blood feud. With this cyclical feud, the *Beowulf*-poet pointedly critiques this process, arguing that blood feud is never quite "eye-for-an-eye"; it is a continuous cycle that spills blood generation after generation, defeating its initial intention of retributive justice.

Wodzak agrees with Beowulf on the futility of peace-pledge marriages. She contends that:

The Anglo-Saxon heroic world understands the grim realities of war, but it possesses no remedy for the feuding and social disruption its code of conduct produces. So the heroic world turns to the domestic world, seeking a peace-weaver that which it does not possess in itself. It finds instead a formula for tragedy, as the ethic of heroism asserts itself over the ties formed through the peace-weaver, and again, the heroic disrupts the continuity of the domestic. (256)

Beowulf's bold speech on blood feud to his men serves a dual purpose: On the one hand, the epic's undoubtedly Christian poet infuses his own doctrine, delivering a sermon in miniature in Beowulf's speech, condemning the pagan precept of blood feud altogether.

This “mini-sermon” reflects Jesus’ condemnation of retribution in the Sermon on the Mount. While criticizing the blood feud practice, however, the *Beowulf*-poet also specifically condemns blood feud’s effect on women, which will be discussed in more depth later. Like the *Beowulf*-poet, the anonymous poets of the Anglo-Saxon elegies *The Wife’s Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* also criticize the blood feud tradition, focusing primarily on its repercussions for women. Appearing in *The Exeter Book* collection (recorded c. AD 1000 but composed c. AD 900), these women’s songs predate *Beowulf*, serving as a template for woman’s voice and the condemnation of blood feud.

CHAPTER IV: *THE WIFE'S LAMENT* AND *WULF AND EADWACER*: THE EMERGENCE AND POWER OF WOMEN'S VOICE IN THE OLD ENGLISH ELEGY

The Exeter Book, a collection of texts translated and compiled by Christian monks circa AD 1000 from earlier exempla dating from circa AD 900, is an invaluable source in the study of Old English literature. Within its folios, the vast assortment of Old English poetry provides an introspective analysis of the Anglo-Saxon people, their culture, and social issues. *The Exeter Book* largely consists of a number of riddles and Christian allegories; however, tucked within its folios is a duo of rather unique texts: two elegies titled *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. The singularity of these texts is ascribed to one element in particular, the narration of a female voice. These women's songs are strikingly similar; they both recount a tragic tale of love, loss, and exile—all hinged on the consequences of blood feud. *The Wife's Lament* is a tale of woe and suffering as told from the vantage point of a wife forced into exile. She has been abandoned by her husband, who has traveled far away to participate in a blood feud. His family's bitterness towards the wife has resulted in their banishment of her; she is forced to live in solitude, ““under actreo, in þam eorðscræfe”” [““under an oak tree, in an earth den””] (l. 36). Here she laments her fate and longs for the return of her lord.

Of all the poems comprising the canon of Old English literature, none is more intriguing or problematic for scholars than *The Wife's Lament*. Indeed, centuries of critical theory and scholarship have yielded few definitive answers concerning the many questions evoked by *The Wife's Lament*. As criticism of the elegy progresses, more questions than solutions arise. According to Jane L. Curry in “Approaches to a

Translation of the Anglo-Saxon ‘The Wife’s Lament,’” “Try as scholars may to make more of it, the Anglo-Saxon elegy known as *The Wife’s Lament* remains as elusive, as obscure as ever. Its suggestions of plotting, exile and passion are little more than allusion and evocation, and yet there is a power to the poem which tempts the curious and the appreciative to speculation” (187). As new historical and literary approaches form, new perspectives in criticism arise, and Anglo-Saxon scholars develop more theories on the elegies. Since scholarship continues to evolve, decisive answers have not been found. In “The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy,” Marilyn Desmond argues that “within the structures of Anglo-Saxon culture women were essentially mute [...] indeed, the standard literary histories for the Anglo-Saxon period do little to acknowledge the presence and tremendous importance of women in Anglo-Saxon culture, as authors, characters, or voices” (574-575). Since women were used to repair and solidify peace bonds between kinships, their position in the culture was anything but mute. However, extant Old English texts do not preserve an overwhelming cache of the feminine perspective.

In a literature in which the main concerns are war, feuds, heroism and comitatus, women are assigned what at first appears to be a secondary role, offering the mead-cup to the warriors in the banquet-hall, or functioning as *freodwebbe*, ‘peace-weavers.’” Though these roles seem secondary, they are in reality primary, diplomatic roles, existing in a much larger masculine society. For a female voice to emerge from a largely masculine world permits a rare introspective look into the social and emotional condition of women affected by blood feud. Ambiguities in textual translations and the number of people involved in the plot of the lyric continue to spark critical survey; the anomalous

nature of the poem's speaker has in itself produced volumes of critical exploration and analysis. Who is she, and why are her pain and suffering so passionately all-consuming? Theories on *The Wife's Lament* abound in Anglo-Saxon literary study, ranging an entire spectrum of speculation and argument. While most critical investigation of the text supports the idea that the narrator is first, indeed a woman, and second, indeed a wife, another hypothesis has emerged regarding the speaker of the elegy. In "Another View of the Old English *Wife's Lament*," Rudolph C. Bambas suggests that the speaker is not a woman lamenting the separation from her husband, but instead a loyal warrior/thane lamenting a separation from his lord. While Bambas' proposal merits a reexamination of the elegy's original text, his central argument is, based on careful critical translation of the text, inconsistent. Bambas contends that the "difficulties of accepting the view that the poem concerns a woman are in the end too great; the probability is that the poem concerns a man. From the evidence of the poem as it exists, it is too difficult to see how the minstrel's audience could understand that he was miming a woman" (309). Scops traveling from mead-hall to mead-hall regaled their audiences with a variety of works and genres, ranging from the warrior culture of *Beowulf* to the lovelorn, bereft condition of *The Wife's Lament*. To assume that audiences would have failed to discern a feminine voice is not a valid argument. Women were often present in the mead-hall audience and relationships between men and women were as complicated in the world of Anglo-Saxons as in modern culture. The relationships discussed in *Beowulf*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are evidence of the complexity of relationships in Anglo-Saxon England.

The scop's audiences would have been largely comprised of warriors who witnessed firsthand the effects of blood feud violence on their mothers, sisters, daughters, nieces, and wives. While the mead-hall audience would have been chiefly male, women, too, would have been present in the scop's audience. After presenting Hrothgar, Beowulf, and her sons with the cup of mead, Wealhþeow herself is seated in Heorot, listening to the sagas of Sigemund and then Finn. After Wealhþeow presents the cup to the king and his retainers, she reaffirms her husband's and sons' prominence in the hall. Then, the *Beowulf*-poet recites, “*Ēode þa tō settle*” [She then moved to her place] (l. 1232). Since men *and* women were present in the mead-hall, scop's would have catered their tales not only for their male audience but for their female audience, too. A lyric with the poignancy of *The Wife's Lament* would in fact have resonated deeply within the warriors of the hall. The closeness of the kinship web and the family's dependence on each other, coupled with women's role as peace-weavers, would have certainly ensured the audience's conception of the elegy.

Desmond argues that the grammatical choices of the poems' composers are a lucid indication of the poet's intention in purposely constructing female speakers. The narrative context of both *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* helps medievalists determine the feminine identities of the poems' voices. Channeling New Historicist literary theory, which purports that “texts within a particular period are linked by a broad totalizing cultural formation,” (Richter 1322), Desmond encourages Anglo-Saxon scholars to examine the elegies in their appropriate historical contexts, arguing, “These two poems must be read as texts that encode a female voice within a patriarchy, particularly the Anglo-Saxon patriarchy, a Germanic culture notable [...] for the

autonomy, responsibility, and legal protection of women” (583-584). As misogynist convictions influence *Beowulf* scholarship, so too do they mar and bias the critical analysis of elegies like *The Wife's Lament*. Desmond contends,

The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer, as anonymous, female-voiced lyrics, have [...] disturbed the patriarchal sensibilities of modern scholars and editors, who have reacted [...] by emending the texts and producing elaborate allegorical readings, thus silencing the female speakers of these two poems and erasing women from Anglo-Saxon literary history. These critics characteristically support [...] that within the structures of Anglo-Saxon culture women were essentially mute. Such proposals [...] illustrate the precarious position of the female-voiced medieval lyric [...] literary history has generally excluded, minimized, or appropriated the roles of women in language. (574-575)

Besides the familial understanding of loss and grief invoked by the elegy, language itself disproves the notion that the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* is masculine. As Bennett observes, mere word choice on behalf of the poet elucidates the gender of the speaker (53). Even the most accomplished surveyor of Old English literature is at times confounded by the complexities and intricacies of the language. As Curry explains, “Translation, even by methods most calculated to exhaust every possibility in every word, can take the translator only so far, for, Anglo-Saxon syntax being what it is, even a matter so small as the placing of a period becomes a commitment to a personal vision of the poem's speaker or the speaker's lord” (188). Therefore, translations depend on the grammatical choices made by each individual translator, as well as the tools at each translator's disposal. Each translator leaves a mark upon Old English scholarship,

proposing new methods with which the works can be studied. Such choices lead to innumerable possibilities in conducting research and translations in Old English literature.

Another aspect of *The Wife's Lament* is that it, like its oft-compared counterpart *Wulf and Eadwacer*, does not align contextually with the other works of *The Exeter Book*. At first glance, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* appear to be completely secular works; unlike other poems found in *The Exeter Book* collection, neither of these elegies can be strictly classified in terms of Christianity, nor are they blatantly infused with Christian doctrine by the scribes who translated them after the conversion. Fellow texts featured in *The Exeter Book* are strikingly Christian in purpose and theme and provide a stark contrast to the seemingly secular women's songs. Both *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, which appear in the *The Exeter Book*, are Christian, or Christianized, verses; the speakers of each mourn their lonely and friendless states on earth, much like the women of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. For the Seafarer and Wanderer, though, hope exists; the message persists that God in Heaven awaits them and will mend their forlorn afflictions, for one day they will abide with Him in eternal friendship and peace in heaven. The concluding lines of *The Seafarer* read,

Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,
 ond þonne gepencan hu we þider cumen;
 ond we þonne eac tilien, þæt we to moten
 in þa ecan eadignesse,
 þær is lif gelong in lufan Dryhtnes,
 hyht in heofonum. Þæs sy þam Halgan þonc,

þæt he us ic geweorþade, wuldres Ealdor,
 ece Dryhten, in ealle tid. Amen. (ll. 117-124)

[Let us think towards a home/and then think how we will go there;/and then
 we likewise must endeavor, that we go/into that fulfilled happiness/there is life
 obtained in God's love/hope in heaven. Thanks be to the Holy one/that he raised
 us, the World's king/eternal Lord, in all time. Amen.⁵]

The Wanderer, too, echoes a similar spiritual sentiment, with its speaker
 proclaiming, “Wel bið þam þe him are seceð/frofre to Fæder on heofonum, þær us eal
 seo fæstnung stondeð” (ll. 114-115) [It will be well for him to seek/solace from the
 Father in heaven, where protection for us all stands⁶]. The Christian poets and scribes of
 these elegies ensure the inclusion of God and salvation in the texts; a reader or audience
 cannot misconstrue the blatant Christianity of their concluding lines. As Crawford
 writes, “Although both the Wanderer and the Seafarer keenly feel the loss of friendship
 and comfort, and pain of being strangers, there is a sense in which they have both
 undertaken voluntary journeys, and of course, their pain is an image of Christian
 renunciation and the idea that the soul is a wanderer on earth until it finds its true home in
 heaven” (215). For the female speakers of the women's songs, however, no mention of
 God is made in either lyric, even as the distraught speakers of the poems lament their
 desolation, fear, and affliction. In placing these women in a godless state, their
 conditions are even more despairing and sympathetic to audiences.

Perhaps the greatest paradigm of Anglo-Saxon Christian literature found in *The Exeter Book* is *The Dream of the Rood*. Unlike its companion texts, which feature only undertones of Christianity in their concluding lines as they were Christianized by scribes,

The Dream of the Rood is a conspicuously Christian work. Instead of an infusion of Christian theology in an otherwise strictly secular manuscript, *The Dream of the Rood* incorporates nuances of the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture in its otherwise strictly spiritual text. The title of the work alone is remarkable when compared to the other *Exeter Book* lyrics: *The Dream of the Rood* literally means *The Dream of the Cross*. Composed as a dream vision, *The Dream of the Rood* is an Anglo-Saxon account of Christ's crucifixion. The speaker of the poem is the rood itself, narrating the events of Christ's last moments. Paralleling the gospel accounts of the death of Christ, *The Dream of the Rood* constructs a Christ-as-warrior figure, depicting him not as a holy savior, but instead as the valiant soldier, willingly offering himself on the battlefield and assuming his place on the cross for all mankind. The rood recounts,

Geseah Ic þa Frean mancynnes
 efstan elne mycle [...]
 Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð—þæt wæs God ælmihtig—
 strang ond stiðmod; gestah he on gealgan heanne [...]
 þa he wolde mancyn lysan. (ll. 33-41)

[Then I saw the savior of mankind/hasten [...]/Then he stripped himself—that
 was God almighty/strong and determined; he ascended the gallows [...]/then to
 ransom mankind.⁷]

Christ, as warrior, appeals to the Anglo-Saxon audience; the men can relate to this young man's soldier-status, commiserating with his ultimate sacrifice to God and King.

Since the inclusion of Christian dogma is so conspicuous in these parallel Old English works, it is quite singular that the Christian scribe of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf*

and *Eadwacer* neglects to incorporate at least an undertone of Christian creed embedded within the lines of the poems. To tag on a line or two at the end of these women's songs would have been feasible for a Christian poet of the 900s or a scribe recording the texts at a monastic order; the closing lines of both *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* are testaments to these Christian afterthoughts. Of *The Exeter Book's* elegies, Cavill argues,

They are basically Christian, homiletic pieces reflecting on experiences of exile enforced [...] drawing consolation from the prospect of 'mercy from the Father in heaven, where for us all security remains.' The poems focus on the decay of all worldly life and wealth, the insecurity of human relationships. The interesting thing is that the same kind of experience for a female character in a poem called *The Wife's Lament* gives rise to no homiletic reflection and no vision of Christian security. (62)

The speaker, distraught, aimless, disillusioned, and lonely, bewailing her losses and the harsh conditions of exile, never looks to God for solace or aid. Prayers do not fall from her lips; hers is a godless state. She begins her lament,

Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg,
hwæt ic yrmþa gebad siþþan Ic up weox,
niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.
A Ic wite wonn minra wræcsiþa. (ll. 1-5)

[I this song make by me full sad/my lonely journey. I
may say/that the miseries I endured as I grew up/ new and old,
were not worse than now./Always I suffer the torture of my exile.⁸]

In the anthology *The Writings of Medieval Women*, Marcelle Thiebaut translates these opening lines of *The Wife's Lament* as,

I tell this story about me, in my sorrow,
 I sing the fate of my voyaging self. I may say that
 Whatever hardship I lived through since I grew up—
 new griefs and old—in those days it was not worse than now.
 Always I grieve in the pain of my torment.⁹ (147)

The speaker, reflecting on her life's troubles, endures more pain and suffering now than ever before. While the speaker is clearly definable as a woman seeking comfort in her state of forced solitude, her exact audience is unclear; to whom is she speaking and directing her lament? This ambiguity would have been a sufficient vantage point for a Christian scribe intent on the suffusion of theology in the text to have the wife praying to God, seeking solace in his mercy and grace, or looking, like the Seafarer and the Wanderer, to the hope of a home in heaven. However, no deliberate intimation of doctrine is found in the wife's plight; the only lord present in *The Wife's Lament* is not Dryhten, but husband. As Andrea Nagy notes in her discourse *Women's Voice in Old English Poetry*, no "overt references" to God or Christianity are found within the text of *The Wife's Lament* (45). Why would a Christian scribe, given free artistic and poetic license, purposely relinquish the opportunity to embed Christianity in an otherwise pagan lyric? To justify the condemnation of the Anglo-Saxon blood feud, the scribe must elucidate the hopelessness of the wife to ensure the audience understands the social and emotional ramifications of blood feud on women.

As the wife continues her lamentations, the poet's intention in omitting Christian principle becomes clearer. The wife suffers due to her husband's protracted involvement in pagan blood feud. She endures first abandonment, when he willingly deserts her to participate in the blood feud vengeance, then exile, when his kinship rejects her and banishes her from the clan. Ordered by her husband to an isle of solitude, the wife is forced to seek refuge in the shelter of an old oak tree. Like Grendel's mother after her, the wife has no male protection; she must fend for herself. The wife laments,

Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum
ofer yþa gelac; hæfde Ic uhtceare
hwær min leodfruma londes wære.
Ða Ic me feran gewat folgað secan,
wineleas wræcca for minreweaþeare.
Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan
þurh dyrne gepoht þæt hy todælden unc,
þæt wit gewidost in woruldrice,
lifdon laðlicost; ond mec longade.
Het mec hlaford min her hear niman.
Ahte Ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede,
holdra freonda; forþon is min hyge geomor [...]
Sceal Ic feor ge neah
mines felalcofan fæhðu dreogan.
Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
under actreo in þam eorðscræfe.

Eald is þes eorðsele; eal Ic eom oflongad.

Sindon dena dimme, duna uphea

bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne;

wic wylna leas [...]

þær Ic wepan mæg mine wræcsiþas. (ll. 6-38)

[First my lord went out from men, over the tumultuous wave; I had sorrow at dawn about where in the lands my prince might be. Then I departed on my journey, seeking shelter, a friendless exile in all my need. Then the kinsmen of my man began to think through hidden thoughts that they would divide us two, so that we two would live the furthest apart in the earthly kingdom; and I longed. My lord commanded me to be taken here. I had few faithful friends in this place. For this my heart is sad [...] Shall I far and near endure my loved one's taking part in feud. He commanded me to dwell in the woods' barrow, under an oak tree in an earth-cave. Old is this earth hall; I am all longing. The valleys are dark, the hills high, bitter enclosures, overgrown with briars; a dwelling without joy [...] There I can only weep about my exile.^{10]}

Cavill constructs a well argued and quite interesting explanation for the scribe's apparent silence through the voice of the wife. According to Cavill, the scribe is not as silent as he may seem on the surface of the translations; he attests that Christianity and the very Church itself *is* undeniably present within the context of both *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, though not explicitly evoked in either of the elegies. Cavill argues that the very poems themselves,

Raise theological questions by their very being [...] there are echoes of Christian concepts in them, hints that help us interpret the poems. The poems look with steady, but unjudging eyes at the miseries women experience. This book does not marginalize women, but gives space to their particular difficulties. It speaks of Christianity which represents people, feels with them, and does not easily judge or condemn. Women were important in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. It gave a voice to the powerless, appealing to those who were suffering. (65-66)

The scribe's omission in infusing Christianity as he translated *The Wife's Lament* should not be accepted as a mere oversight. Though hints of Christian doctrine are not blatant in the context of the poems, intimations of Christianity *are* discernible in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and as such these elegies should be considered as Christian as well.

While the wife's voice in *The Wife's Lament* may not directly address the husband, or even the circumstance in which his actions have placed her, the blood feud itself, her voice *does* actively address the emotions the exile has brought upon her and the conditions in which she is being forced to spend her exile. The wife's voice lends her credence, power, and agency. Barrie Ruth Strauss' treatise "Women's Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in 'The Wife's Lament,'" characterizes the wife of the elegy not as a frail and fragile creature but instead as a woman of means and strength. In the action of speaking, the wife has achieved for herself a certain level of agency through her voice. Strauss asserts,

Though traditionally perceived as merely passive" the wife acts through her use of words [...] telling her story from her own point of view is a positive act for the

speaker, the means by which she attempts to control the way the events of her life will be seen. The way the wife tells her story—that is, the way she uses words—reveals that she does not merely passively accept her fate, but rather takes advantage of a form of action available to women of her time. (269-270)

In *The Wife's Lament*, the Christian poet preserves not only the wife's voice and sorrowful state, but the voices and tragedies of all women affected by the system of blood feud. In transmitting this woman's song, the Christian poet suggests that women were the true victims of the violent retaliatory custom. They suffered isolation, exile, and loss—of loved ones, hope, and the home—due to the Anglo-Saxon custom of blood feud. Her voice is a vehicle for the poet's urging to end blood feud because of its ramifications on women.

Since the beginning of Anglo-Saxon and Old English literary scholarship, *Wulf and Eadwacer* has been posited beside *The Wife's Lament* in critical analysis and interpretation. Though *Wulf and Eadwacer* is much shorter than *The Wife's Lament*, the elegies nonetheless mirror each other in theme, tone, archetype, and voice. In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, a wife flees into exile from the wrath of an abusive husband, Eadwacer, who is in the process of instigating blood feud. The wife's lover, Wulf, is the target of the vengeance. The speaker, who is alone and frightened, sings of her friendless and woeful condition.

The same critical ambiguities that plague scholarship of *The Wife's Lament* also surface within the context of *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Theories abound as to the speaker's true identity, but most scholars contend it is a woman vainly hoping to escape the grasp of a violent husband, Eadwacer, while grieving for the loss of her lover, Wulf. Anglo-

Saxon scholars Marijane Osborne and Dolores Warwick Frese propose that since sensual love was not a prevalent trope of Anglo-Saxon culture, it would be more likely that the elegy's speaker is instead a mother mourning the loss of her son due to battle or blood feud. In "*Wulf and Eadwacer*: The Adulterous Woman Reconsidered," Frese challenges traditional assumptions, arguing, "I believe we might profitably re-examine here, preparatory to relocating the poem in the elegaic category, where its passion would seem to be, rather than sexual and amorous, more maternal and religious in its motivation" (2). Frese bases her atypical translation on the poet's employment of the term *hwelp* in line 16 of the lyric. While *hwelp* in Old English does translate into "son" in modern English, there is no evidence to confirm Frese's translation. Nagy refutes Frese's unconventional reading of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, stating, "There is nothing in *Wulf and Eadwacer* that would unambiguously suggest a mother-son relationship. It is true that the *hwelp* of line 16 might be the speaker's son, but it is also clear that this *hwelp* is not the same as Wulf" (7-8). The general consensus among Old English scholars and critics is that the *hwelp* is the child of the speaker and her lover Wulf. The text explicitly states the speaker is holding her child and that she is running from Eadwacer, of whom she is afraid, longing for Wulf, with whom she yearns to be.

As in *The Wife's Lament*, a solitary female voice echoes from within the lines of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, articulating her pain, angst, and torment. Mimicking the speaker of *The Wife's Lament*, the female voice in *Wulf and Eadwacer* has too been abandoned by the very warrior culture culpable for her protection. Victim of a violent and remiss husband, the woman has sought asylum with a lover. Panicked and alone, she laments her plight:

Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.
 Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworþen.
 Sindon wæltreowe weras þær on ige.
 Willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð...
 Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode,
 þonne hit wæs renig weder, ond ic reotugu sæt...
 Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine
 seoce gedydon. (ll. 4-15)

[Wulf is on an island, I on another. That island is secure, overgrown with fens.
 There are bloodthirsty warriors on the island. They will consume him if he
 comes into their troop. I pursued in my hopes the far-wandering journeys of
 Wulf, when it was rainy weather, and I sat mournful...Wulf, my Wulf, my
 hopes have made me sick.¹¹]

Again, God and the Christian scribe are silent throughout the work; when bewailing her condition, the speaker does not cry out for Dryhten's comfort or heaven's peace, nor does she make any perceptible allusion to Christianity at all. She is a woman desperately enmeshed in her husband's involvement in blood feud. Because of his role in initiating the feud, the speaker suffers abandonment by the very society to which she belongs; on the island, she is vulnerable and exposed to the dangers of her exiled and unprotected condition. In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the Christian poet and scribe critique the custom of blood feud, purposely exhibiting the effects of blood feuds on women in Anglo-Saxon England. These relatively obscure women's songs lead into the more detailed and denser epic *Beowulf*, a work that reveals more about the condition of early Anglo-Saxon women

for their Danish and Geatish predecessors than any other extant text. The women in this epic poem are a tapestry of divergent views of women, nuanced and subtle, at times noble and at times monstrous.

CHAPTER V: GRENDEL'S MOTHER AS VICTIM OF BLOOD FEUD, NOT A MURDERING MONSTER

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of the consequence of blood feud for Anglo-Saxon women is found in the tragic construction of Grendel's mother, whose tale is the core of the great Anglo-Saxon warrior epic *Beowulf*. Set against the backdrop of Danish and Geatish (Southern Swedish) heroic culture, *Beowulf* is a story of battle, blood feud, mead halls, and camaraderie among warriors. The poem survives in one unique manuscript, the *Nowell Codex*, *Cotton Vitellius A. xv*, which contains a fragment of *The Life of Saint Christopher*, the more complete texts *Letters of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Wonders of the East*, and the Old English work *Judith*. Set in the pagan past, *Beowulf* is recounted by a conspicuously Christian poet who denounces the heathen practices of old and promotes Christianity. Infusing such hard-to-miss biblical allusions and references to the "Līf-frēa, wuldres Wealdend" (Lord of life, glorious almighty), the *Beowulf*-poet modifies the original text of the epic to better suit the purposes of the newly Christianized audience. The poet projects Beowulf in the image of a great hero, likened to a savior, who rescues Hrothgar's kingdom from the evil clutches of Grendel, a "grimma gæst" [grim apparition] and a "fēond on helle" [fiend from hell], who is descended from Cain and bent on bloodshed. Beowulf assumes Hrothgar's protracted battle against Grendel, a blood feud that has lasted for "twelf wintra tīd/torn geþolode" [twelve winters/seasons of woe].

Comprising some three hundred-eighty lines of text, more lines of text than both Beowulf's battle with Grendel and Beowulf's battle with the dragon combined, the battle

with Grendel's mother is a definitive example of the strife Anglo-Saxon women endured because of man's participation in blood feud. Grendel and his mother are exiled, according to the epic's poet, due to the oldest recorded blood feud—Genesis' account of Cain murdering his brother Abel. Though she does not participate in her son's initiation of blood feud against Hrothgar and the warriors of Heorot, Grendel's mother *is* ultimately enmeshed in the feud when Beowulf arrives in Denmark and assumes Hrothgar's battle against Grendel. She first loses her son in the blood feud and then must take up the feud herself to exact vengeance for her loss, as there is no one else to assume this responsibility for her. Grendel's mother is the epitome of women's suffering as a consequence of blood feud.

The *Beowulf*-poet's omission of a name for Grendel's mother is quite indicative in and of itself; few women in Anglo-Saxon literature do merit a name, and those who have specific monikers are members of the upper nobility—women like Wealhþeow, Hildeburh, and Hygd—all of whom are queens. In denying Grendel's mother a specific name, the poet initiates what critics and medievalists have been doing to her since the birth of *Beowulf* scholarship—stripping her of humanity. The condition of exile further distances Grendel's mother from the society that feels no compunction in banishing her. Forced to live in a mere-cave outside Hrothgar's kingdom, her sole link to the human world is through the bonds of motherhood. She is known as nothing else and seems to have no other viable function in the world around her; she is both known for, and limited by, her role as mother. In "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," scholar Renee Trilling defends the actions of Grendel's mother against the heroic world which has rejected her. Trilling argues, "Named by the text only as a *modor*, her

identity is bound up in the existence of her child; without a son, she is no longer a mother, and Grendel's death leaves her [completely] without identity [...] she signifies nothing [...] she is an outsider to the social group, and as a woman, she is doubly outside" (7). Once Grendel is killed in blood feud, his mother's identity is further obscured; without a name and without a son, she is in exile not only from the world of Anglo-Saxon culture, but from sheer existence as well.

An even larger complication in the analysis of Grendel's mother lies within both misinterpretations and assumptions of Old English translations. In translating both the battles between Beowulf and Grendel and Beowulf and Grendel's mother, scholars have for more than a century skewed the Old English text to conform to their own agendas concerning Anglo-Saxon social and gender studies. Because Grendel and his mother are juxtaposed with the warrior culture of Heorot—the "good"—many scholars readily deem them "evil"; little concern is given as to why Grendel's mother has been forced into exile in the first place, or why a woman from a society hinged on male protection has been so easily displaced with no concern for her safety. To assume that she is exiled on the premise of her lineage to Cain is a tenuous defense; nowhere in *Beowulf* does a line state that *she* is a descendent of Cain, nor does the poet ascribe "monstrous" characteristics to Grendel's mother. As her only link to humanity is her son, her only association with monstrosity is through her son as well. In "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," Christine Alfano defends Grendel's mother against these false accusations and presumptions of monstrosity which are based on the sole premise that Grendel is her son. Alfano asserts,

Lacking any identity independent of her son's even in name, Grendel's mother replicates the historical experience of millions of women who were defined through their male relatives. She finds herself implicated in her child's monstrosity, as unchallenged assumptions subsume her maternal role within a son's identity. Refusing to differentiate between mother and son, these translators [...] transform her into an inhuman beast; and readers consume their modified texts as if they represent authoritative truth. (12)

To simply conclude that Grendel's mother is iniquitous because her son is so detracts from the plot of the epic and distorts translations of the text. In presuming she is evil like her son, scholars dismiss the fact that by Anglo-Saxon law, Grendel's mother has the right to exact blood feud vengeance for her loss. As Wendy Hennequin attests in the article "The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother,"

Grendel's mother certainly is constructed as Beowulf's antagonist, but the poem does not depict her as a monster or even a villain in the modern sense of the word. True, she crosses gender lines and performs the functions of warrior, avenger, and king, all generally associated only with men, and she is certainly depicted as supernatural. Despite these qualities, however, neither the poem nor its characters demonize her or even criticize her actions; rather, she is presented as a noble and brave opponent and even as a somewhat sympathetic character. (504)

The *Beowulf*-poet does not construct or limit Grendel's mother within the parameters of monstrosity. When she first appears in the text, the poet simply labels her "Grendles mōdor/ides, āglæc-wīf" (ll.1258-1259). In modern English, the Old English term "ides" translated means "lady" or "woman." An "āglæca" is a "fierce

opponent/warrior,” and a “wīf” is a “woman.” Thus, in Old English, an “āglæc-wīf” is a “warrior-woman.” None of these terms, either independently or collectively, imply a negative connotation, nor do any of the terms suggest that Grendel’s mother is inherently evil. Contemporary versions of *Beowulf* are responsible for the vilification of Grendel’s mother, molding her into the image of the archetypal antagonist.

Popular contemporary translators and lexicographers of Old English texts and dictionaries have affected generations of Anglo-Saxon study, provoking a burgeoning dichotomy among scholars concerning Grendel’s mother. Too many others have readily accepted partisan interpretations of Grendel’s mother, and in so doing, the significance of Grendel’s mother has continued to deteriorate under the scope of such unfair treatment. In his popular translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney omits the term *ides* from line 1295 altogether, significantly altering and marring the feminine human (and maternal) image of Grendel’s mother in her initial appearance in the epic. Heaney translates the “āglæc-wīf” / “warrior-woman” construction in line 1295 as “monstrous hell-bride,” words which do not even appear in Old English glossaries and dictionaries in connection with the terms “ides,” “āglæca,” or “wīf.” In preserving her story, the Christian poet openly criticizes the pagan practice of blood feud, its effect on women, and the state of motherhood in the perilous warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons. Hennequin illustrates this academic dilemma, arguing,

Although some recent scholarship has considered the effects of misogyny and gender expectations on the perceptions of Grendel’s mother, clearly the problem is [...] the self-perpetuation of the scholarly tradition. Students first approach *Beowulf* through translations, which almost universally present Grendel’s mother

as a monster, a demon [...] [many] graduate students, reading *Beowulf* in Old English for the first time, have these translations in mind and the misleading dictionaries and glossaries in hand; their research of seminal articles on the poem will lead them to scholarship that dismisses, reduces, or demonizes Grendel's mother. Scholarly critics and translators researching *Beowulf* will find an entire critical tradition of Grendel's mother as monster, and, using this evidence, they write scholarship and translations which disseminates these assumptions yet again. (521)

With preconceived notions in mind and the "traditional" translations of *Beowulf* at hand, Old English literary scholarship cannot experience the necessary shift in perspective in order to further explore the depths of a character like Grendel's mother. In assuming the popular contemporary texts remain true to the original Old English texts, new scholars do not always perform their own analysis of Grendel's mother. She remains a pitiless monster who cannot function as anything else. In neglecting to investigate her as a *woman*, the poet's purpose for including her in the epic, particularly at its core, is lost. Grendel's mother is the very embodiment of the implications social practices like blood feud had on women in the warrior culture.

Versions like Burton Raffel's rendition, which blatantly refers to both Grendel and his mother as "monsters" (l. 414) and Heaney's translation are the very foundation for most students' study of *Beowulf*. Alfano constructs the central argument for "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother" on the basis of this principle. Affirming the injudicious supposition of Anglo-Saxon students and scholars alike, Alfano argues that "as with any archetype [...] the chief danger [...] lies in its

complacent acceptance. The critic [...] searches for, finds, and analyzes the archetype; but never thinks to question how, or whether, it actually came to be embedded in the text. Consequently, while such scholars believe that they are finding the epitome of “feminine monstrosity” in Grendel’s mother, they are [...] simply reading this image into *Beowulf*” (11). Because critics often rely on printed and popular translations of the original Old English text, reception of previous translations will continue to negatively impact the structure of Grendel’s mother and her prominence in *Beowulf*.

As in the literary analysis of most other cultures, eras, and genres, Anglo-Saxon scholarship has been executed principally by men and largely prior to the feminist movement of the twentieth century. According to Hennequin, misinterpretations of Grendel’s mother are based on both misconceptions in the cultural context of the Anglo-Saxons themselves and the misogynist biases of Old English scholars. She writes that “the scholarly tendency to dismiss, condemn, or demonize her derives from misogyny and cultural expectations of women [...] translators and critics...have consistently interpreted Grendel’s mother as demonic, monstrous, and horrible” (504). Hennequin attributes this trend in scholarship largely to the contrast between Grendel’s mother and the other women of *Beowulf*. She argues that “because Grendel’s mother does not behave like Wealhþeow, Hygd, or Hildeburh, whom scholars consider to be proper models of womanhood, Grendel’s mother must be monstrous” (504). For centuries scholars have either presumed the insignificance of women in the warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons or chose simply to ignore the presence of women in the traditions altogether. Even J.R.R. Tolkien, in his critically acclaimed treatise “The Monsters and

the Critics,” asserts, “I shall confine myself mainly to [...] Grendel and the Dragon” (6), and seems to entirely exclude Grendel’s mother from the corpus of his work.

Tolkien’s reexamination of early *Beowulf* scholarship is groundbreaking study, though it is at times scrutinized for appearing to neglect the “hag” episode which comprises more lines of text than any of Beowulf’s other battles and falls in the greater middle segment of the poem. The focus of Tolkien’s work is on the monsters of *Beowulf*—Grendel and the dragon. Since Grendel’s mother is not evaluated in Tolkien’s critical analysis of the monsters, it is evident he does not consider her monstrous as many other medievalists do. Tolkien’s work supports the humanity of Grendel’s mother and requires readers and audiences to examine her as mother, human—not monster. Since she is human, she must be considered in human terms. She grieves, she suffers, she experiences loss and hopelessness. She must too, then, as a human be considered in terms of the law. Her rights and legal obligations to exact blood feud vengeance must not only be identified by scholars but accepted, too.

Like Tolkien before her, Alfano advocates a more sympathetic perception of Grendel’s mother; she argues that,

This woman-as-monster motif is a [...] construct [...] superimposed on *Beowulf*, thereby rewriting both character and text [...] as a result [...] the reader can interact with the text only through the filter of the translator’s subjectivity, which has unfortunate repercussions for our view of Grendel’s mother. Most *Beowulf* translators, motivated by [...] biases [...] produce an exaggerated version of the original *ides, aglæcwif*. Grendel’s mother disrupts gender conventions; to the Anglo-Saxons, this made her *atol*, “terrible,” but to [...] translators, it makes her

“monstrous.” Stripping Grendel's mother of humanity, translators transform an avenging mother into a bloodthirsty monster. (1-2)

To further remove her from the scope of humanity, Grendel's mother is in exile; she has been forced into the fringes of civilization by a society in which women fall under the direct tutelage of men—first their fathers and then their husbands. The motives for her displacement are unclear; the *Beowulf* poet offers no commentary as to why mother and son have been forced from Hrothgar's kingdom. For a culture rooted in kinship and familial obligation, exile was the most extreme form of punishment for the Anglo-Saxons. To be excommunicated from the clan was a reproach from which there was no recovery. Outcasts were charged to wander aimlessly in the vain hopes of finding solace and asylum in neighboring clans; but to shame one's own kinship meant absolute dishonor and contiguous kinships frequently denied refuge to exiles. In order to survive without male protection, Grendel's mother must assume the gender functions of both men and women in her exile at the mere.

In transgressing the expected gender roles of women, although she must for survival purposes, Grendel's mother is forced under a microscope. Male scholars in particular are mystified by her very presence in the *Beowulf* text. Acker maintains that in assuming warrior status and avenging her son's death, Grendel's mother “threatens not just an individual man's dominance but the whole system of male dominance” (708). However, it is beyond her appropriation of masculinity that truly perplexes critics; it is also beyond her assumption of agency, in a time when most scholars deem women should not possess their own sovereignty, which truly bewilders them. It is the sheer power with which she dominates the warrior culture and invokes fear in the core of the heroic world

that stymies Anglo-Saxon scholars. Grendel's mother is what contemporary critics term the "Other." She does not fit within the social parameters of her culture, yet her existence cannot be ignored by the society which has made her an outcast. In breaking gender barriers, she is neither wholly female nor wholly male: she is an "Other" who further disrupts society's codes and expectations. Julia Kristeva likens this concept to the *abject*. In her discourse *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva asserts,

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside [...] rejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects [...] it lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. (1-2)

Grendel's mother is the *abject*; even though she has been forced outside the kingdom, she never ceases as a threat to disrupt the masculine social powers of Hrothgar and his warriors. Though Hrothgar is king of the Danes, Grendel's mother has assumed a role far greater; she is a composite of mother, warrior, defender, and, as Hennequin attests, king in her own right. Hennequin argues, "Grendel's mother also crosses gender lines to participate in the masculine realm of government [...] she rules in her own right, as Hrothgar [...] and Beowulf do [...] like Hrothgar and Beowulf, Grendel's mother owns a rather magnificent hall [...] she personally defends her territory from outside threats" (510-511). Grendel's mother sparks controversy because she defies the prescribed

gender expectations of Anglo-Saxon scholars and violates the traditions of the heroic culture.

As an “Other,” an “abject,” Grendel’s mother invokes a certain fear within the warriors of the kingdom. She is a threat like none other, unparalleled with any enemy with whom the Danes have fought before; however, ultimately, she is, at the nexus, fundamentally a part of them. Trilling argues, “The abject, after all, originates within the culture from which it is expunged; its ‘powers of horror’ stem from precisely the originary unity that precedes abjection, and the abject terrifies us because we recognize that it is really a part of us” (4). The raw power of Grendel’s mother is inherent within the warriors of Heorot; they recognize her brute force because it is a part of themselves as well. Because she is contradictory to the social and cultural expectations of what an Anglo-Saxon woman should be, Acker labels Grendel’s mother as “a kind of feminine antitype” (704). What bewilders Anglo-Saxon scholars, therefore, is a culmination of Grendel’s mother’s might and her violation of gender boundaries. Her masculine capabilities challenge society’s prescribed expectations for women and result in her vilification. She is *not* a peace-weaver, so she is not categorized within the typical expectations of Anglo-Saxon women.

Coupled with her physical stamina and the appropriation of masculinity, the fear induced by Grendel’s mother is due largely also to how she functions *as a mother*. Because she breaches the fundamental role of woman—peaceweaver—she obtains from literary scholars a certain level of “monstrosity.” Alfano notes that “Grendel’s mother merits this title simply by virtue of her masculine behavior patterns” and that “her moral ambiguity resides in her departure from the peace-weaver stereotype” (5). In defying

feminine gender stereotypes, Grendel's mother severs herself from her inherent function; Grendel's mother is not submissive, nor does she mollify blood feud or unite conflicting clans. She performs too far outside the strictures of Anglo-Saxon motherhood and womanhood to warrant any sense of empathy from critics. According to Anglo-Saxon customary standards, Grendel should protect his mother; he should exact blood feud revenge and provide security for her. Since Grendel, the masculine, has failed her, and since society has long since cast her out, Grendel's mother has no choice but to respond to her circumstances as warrior. Bitel surveys the role of mothers in Anglo-Saxon society, centering much of her commentary on the function and action of Grendel's mother. Of Anglo-Saxon mothers, Bitel writes,

Be they wealthy wives or cast-out[s] [...] their communities handed them the same imperatives. Yet marriage and motherhood were difficult tasks, given the violence of the environment [...] Conceiving, bearing, and protecting children was what they had to do, often without sufficient support from spouse, kin, or anyone else. Grendel's mother, like many a medieval woman, was left to defend her offspring without benefit of caring mate, protective family, or allies of any other kind [...] Women aimed [...] to make their families and households secure.

(156)

Because of her isolated state, Grendel's mother must defend her child alone. When Beowulf intrudes her hall at the mere, Grendel's mother is doubly violated by the very society that expects her to function as a protector of the home. To deem her a monster because she seeks revenge for her only child's murder and on the basis that she pursues to

assure the safety of her home betrays the marked cultural expectations of the society in which she dwells. As Acker argues,

Grendel's dam may have seemed monstrous not only because she was a female exacting revenge but more specifically because she was a mother [...] [she was] a mother expected to be empowered chiefly through her son, [she] was too horrible to consider in the destructive role of an avenger. Seen from within the socialized world of the hall, such a figure could only be a monster from the frontiers of the human world, on the borders of the animal world. (707)

Through her actions, Grendel's mother separates herself from the other mothers in *Beowulf*. While Wealhþeow employs speech to avert the involvement of her sons in a possible future blood feud with Beowulf, and while Hildeburh may only merely shed tears for the loss of her son due to blood feud vengeance, Grendel's mother *acts*. The *Beowulf*-poet says,

Grendles mōdor,
 ides, āglæc-wīf yrmþe gemund
 sē þe wæter-egesan wunian scolde,
 cealde strēamas, siþðan Cain wearð
 tō ecg-banan āngan brēþer,
 fæderen-mæge [...] Ða non wōc fela
 geōsceaft-gāsta; wæs þæra Grendel sum
 heoro-wearh hetelīc, sē æt Heorote fand
 wæccendne wer wīges bīdan.
 Þær him āglæca ætgræpe wearð;

hwæpre hē gemunde mægenes strenges,
 gim-fæste gife, ðe him God sealed,
 frōfre ond fultum; ðy hē þone fēond ofercwōm,
 gehnægde helle-gāst [...] Ond his mōdor þā gyt
 gīfre ond galg-mōd gegān wolde
 sorh-fulne sīð, sunu dēoð wrecan.
 Cōm þā tō Heorote, ðær Hring-Dene
 geond þæt sæld swæfun. Þā ðær sōna wearð
 edhwyrft eorlum siþðan inne fealh
 Grendles mōdor [...]
 Hraðe hēo æþelunga āne hæfde
 fæste befangen, þā hēo tō fenne gang. (ll. 1258-1295)

[Grendel's mother, wife, female-warrior, was mindful of wrongs [...] and
 his mother then came forth, ravenous and sad in mind, grievous always; her
 son's death pushed her forward. Then she came to Heorot where the ring-Danes
 lay asleep. Then a nobleman was snatched up by Grendel's mother. She hastened
 quickly; she took one of the nobleman and went to the fen.¹²]

Grendel's mother does not seek to destroy Heorot after the death of her son, nor
 does she concern herself with discerning the identity of her son's killer in order to exact
 revenge. As a former member of Hrothgar's kingdom, she is familiar with the law codes
 of the warrior culture; she understands the precept of blood feud and its conventions.
 Since she no longer resides within the protection of male dominance, Grendel's mother
 has no choice but to assume blood feud vengeance; it is her legal responsibility and right

to exact revenge for her child. She exacts revenge fairly, taking one life for the loss of her only child; she does not massacre the sleeping men of Heorot, because in so doing, Grendel's mother—who at this point is functioning no longer as mother but as warrior—would be violating the most established and respected of the Anglo-Saxon legal decrees. As prescribed by primeval tradition, men executed blood feud vengeance for a fallen kinsman. The incorporation of a feminine avenger, specifically one of Grendel's mother's caliber, challenges the very culture from which the poem arises. Trilling asks,

Why [...] is she not an avenging brother or uncle? [...] the poem makes her his mother, not just any avenging relative, and it does so for a variety of reasons. The horror of the maternal and its relation to the abject is [...] chief among them; yet, at the same time, the poem assumes the same kind of affective bond between Grendel and his mother as that between a human mother and child, and this bond provides the motivation for Grendel's mother's attack on Heorot. (9)

While *Beowulf* undoubtedly is a narrative about and set in a pagan warrior culture, it is at the same time undoubtedly told by a Christian poet who infuses his own religious doctrine into the text. The poet voices his disapproval of the maltreatment of Grendel's mother at the hands of the very society which should protect her. He criticizes blood feud and the effect it has on her, a solitary woman in exile. First, she is enmeshed in blood feud when her son wages it on Hrothgar's kingdom. Then she is further embroiled in feud when her son is killed and she must take up the sword of vengeance. The poet condemns not *her* actions, but the compass of blood feud altogether on a society, specifically on its female victims. By showcasing Grendel's mother's struggles and defeat at the cost of blood feud vengeance, the poet is permitting her voice to emerge in

an epic otherwise deemed as heroic; the battle scene with Grendel's mother, however, is, like the women's songs—a lament.

VI: CONCLUSION

In preserving *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *Beowulf's* battle scene with Grendel's mother, Christian poets and scribes preserved much more than just the literature of Anglo-Saxon England. They recorded the feminine voice, a rare perspective emerging from a society founded principally on the fundamentals of warfare and male dominance. The women's songs stand as testaments to the strife and discord women suffered as a consequence of their husbands' participation in blood feud. Their stories are not merely recounted as third person narratives, as much of the other extant texts from the period are; in the elegies, these women are empowered, speaking up for themselves, voicing their anguish, anger, grief, and fear. They are an authority on the ramifications of feud and vengeance, not only for women, but for an entire culture as well.

While Grendel's mother is never given an active voice in *Beowulf*, her story, too, magnifies the social implications of blood feud on women. Like the speakers of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, she has been exiled from the society that is responsible for her protection. Not only does she suffer her son's death by means of blood feud, but she must, by an obligation prescribed by warrior culture, assume vengeance for her loss. In fulfilling what is legally and rightfully hers, Grendel's mother is not commended for her valor in battle. Instead, she is maligned for her actions, branded as a monster and hell-bride. Over a thousand years after *Beowulf's* composition, the power of Grendel's mother still intimidates. Her agency as "āglæca-wīf" and her story of suffering and loss exemplify the effects of blood feud on women.

Christian poets and scribes not only condemned the effect of blood feud on women in their adaptations of *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and Beowulf's scene with Grendel's mother, but the overall general peril and neglect women often faced in Anglo-Saxon England. The abandonment, loneliness, and exile suffered by the elegies' speakers and Grendel's mother are not based solely on humanity's disregard of them, or the effects of blood feud on their lives, but on God's repudiation of them as well; these women were forsaken by their culture, its conventions, and God. In preserving these accounts and voices, the scribes express their disapproval of the disregard of women in terms of blood feud. Women were instrumental in the very constructs of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England. The conversion itself was fueled largely in part due to Anglo-Saxon queens and noblewomen, beginning at the very onset of the conversion in 597 with the queen of Kent, the Christian wife of Æthelbert. Her political and imperial influence on King Æthelbert, compounded with the arguments and persuasion of Augustine, laid the foundations of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England. Without her influence, the Christian conversion may not have been possible, and with this failure, Pope Gregory's mission to Christianize Anglo-Saxon England may have never come into fruition. In preserving *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother, Christian poets and scribes condemn more than just the heathen practice of blood feud. They examine and criticize blood feud's specific effect on women and the irreverence shown to women, in terms of blood feud vengeance, during the Anglo-Saxon era.

NOTES

1. Each translation within the text of the thesis is my own, including this one; I have also included in appendices A and B popular contemporary translations of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, respectively. The popular contemporary translations included were my key points of reference in forming my thesis and in constructing/cross-referencing my own translations of the texts.
2. These lines of *Wulfstan's Address to the English* are, like the other translations in the thesis, my own.
3. These lines of *Beowulf*, ll. 1070-1125, are my own translation. Appendix C features Seamus Heaney's popular translation of these same lines of text.
4. These lines of *Beowulf*, ll. 2032-2060, are my own translation. Appendix D features Heaney's popular translation of these same lines of text.
5. These lines of *The Seafarer*, ll. 117-124, are my own translations. Appendix E contains Treharne's popular translation of the these same lines of text.
6. These lines of *The Wanderer*, ll. 114-115, are my own translations. Treharne translates the same lines as, "It will be well for him who seeks mercy/consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us all security stands" (47).
7. These lines of *The Dream of the Rood*, ll. 33-41, are my own translations. Treharne translates these same lines as, "I saw then the Savior of mankind/hasten with great zeal [...]He stripped himself then, young hero—that was God almighty/strong and resolute; he ascended on the high gallows [...]when he wanted to ransom mankind" (111).

8. These lines of *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 1-5, are my own translations. Appendix A includes Thiebaux's and Treharne's popular contemporary translations of the elegy.
9. For the complete text of Thiebaux's translation of *The Wife's Lament*, please see appendix A.
10. Please see Appendix A for the full Old English text of *The Wife's Lament*, as well as Thiebaux's and Treharne's popular contemporary translations of the elegy. These lines, 6-38, are my own translations.
11. Please see Appendix B for the full Old English text of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, as well as Thiebaux's and Treharne's popular contemporary translations of the elegy. These lines, 4-15, are my own translations.
12. These lines of *Beowulf*, ll. 1258-1295, are my own translation. Appendix H features Heaney's popular translation of the same text.

APPENDIX A

The Wife's Lament

Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
 minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg
 hwæt ic yrmþa gebad siþþan ic up weox
 niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.
 A ic wite wonn minra wræcsiþa.
 Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum
 ofer yþa gelac; hæfde Ic uhtceare
 hwær min leodfruma londes wære.
 Ða Ic me feran gewat folgað secan,
 wineleas wræcca for minre weaþeare.
 Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan
 þurh dyrne geþoht þæt hy todælden unc,
 þæt wit gewidost in woruldrice,
 lifdon laðlicost; ond mec longade.
 Het mec hlaford min her hear niman.
 Ahte Ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede,
 holdra freonda; forþon is min hyge geomor...
 Ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde
 heardsæligne, hygegeomorne,

mod miþendne, morþor hycgende
 bliþe gebæro. Ful oft wit beotedan
 þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana,
 owiht elles. Eft is þæt onhworfen.
 Is nu swa hit no wære
 Freondescipe uncer. Sceal Ic feor ge neah
 mines felalcofan fæhðu dreogan.
 Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
 under actreo in þam eorðscræfe.
 Eald is þes eorðsele; eal Ic eom oflongad.
 Sindon dena dimme, duna uphea
 bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne;
 wic wynna leas. Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat
 fromsiþ frean. Frynd sind on eorþan,
 leofe lifgende, leger weardiað,
 þonne Ic on uhtan ana gonge
 under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu.
 þær Ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg
 þær Ic wepan mæg mine wræcsiþas,
 earfoþa fela; forþon Ic æfre ne mæg
 þære modceare minre gerestan,
 ne ealles þæs longapes þe mec on þissum life begeat.
 A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,

heard heortan gepoht, swylce habban sceal
bliþe gebæro eac þon breostceare,
sinsorgna gedraeg, sy æt him sylfum gelong
eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes æt min freond siteð,
under stanhliþe, storme behrimed,
wine werigmod wætre beflowen,
on dreorsele; dreogeð se min wine
micle modceare; he gemon to oft
wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
of langope leofes abidan!

The Wife's Lament

The following is a popular translation by Marcelle Thiebaux.

I tell this story about me, in my sorrow,
I sing the fate of my voyaging self. I may say that
whatever hardship I lived through since I grew up—
new griefs and old—in those days it was not worse than now.
Always I grieve in the pain of my torment.
First my lord went away from his people
over the tossing waves. I felt cold care in the dark before dawn,
wondering where my lord of the lands might be.
Then I left on a journey to seek and serve him—
a friendless wanderer in my terrible need.
That man's kinsmen began to plot
with secret scheming to split us both apart,
so that we two—widely asunder in the world—
lived most wretchedly. And longing smote me.
My lord called to me to take up my hard dwelling here.
I had few loved ones in this country,
few devoted friends. For this my mind mourns.
Then I found myself a most husbandly man,
but a man with hard luck, brooding in his heart;

he hid his moods, his murderous thoughts,
yet seemed blithe in his bearing. Very often we boasted that
none but death alone would drive us apart—
not anything else! All that is whorled backward, changed;
now it's as if it never had been,
the loving friendship the both of us had. Far and near I must
suffer the feud of my dearly loved man.

They forced me to live in a grove of the wood
under an oak tree in an earth hovel.

Old is this den of earth. I am stabbed with longing.

The valleys are dark, the hills rise high,
bitterly sharp is my garrison overgrown with brambles,
a joyless stronghold. Here very often what seizes me fiercely
is the want of my husband! There are friends on earth,

Llvers living who lie clasped in their bed,
while I walk alone in the hours before daybreak
under the oak tree, throughout this earth cave
where I must remain the summerlong day,
where I can weep the sorrows

of my many hardships, because I never can
find sweet rest for that heart's grief of mine—
not for all of that longing laid on me in this life.

Always must the young be troubled in mood,

with thoughts harsh in their hearts, yet at the same time
seem blithe in bearing despite a care-burdened breast
and a swarm of sorrows. The young man must rely on himself
for all he gets of the world's joy. He must be a far-flung outlaw
in a distant country.

So my lord friend sits
under a stone cliff crusted with frost in the storm—
my lover dreary in spirit. Water flows all around him
in his bleak dwelling. That friend of mine suffers
great sorrow of heart. Too often he remembers
a more blissful house. Unhappy is anyone
who must longingly wait for a lover.

The Wife's Lament

The following is a translation by Elaine Treharne.

I relate this very mournful riddle about myself,
about my own journey. I am able to relate
those miseries that I endured since I grew up,
of new and old ones, never more than now.
Forever I have suffered the torment of my exile.
First my lord went away from the people
over tossing waves; I had anxiety at dawn
about where in the land my leader of the people might be.
Then I departed on my journey to seek a refuge,
a friendless exile because of my woeful need.
The kinsmen of the man began to think,
through secret consideration, that they would separate us,
so that we two would live furthest apart in this worldly kingdom,
most hatefully; and yearning occupied me.
My cruel lord commanded me to be taken here.
I possessed few dear ones in this region,
loyal friends; because of that my mind is mournful.
Then I found for myself a very suited man to be
ill-fated, sad at heart,

having a concealing mind, intending violent crime,
but with a cheerful bearing. Very often, we two vowed
that nothing would part the two of us
expect death alone; afterwards, that has turned around.

It is now as if it never were
the friendship of us two. Far and near I shall endure
that feud of my beloved.

He commanded me to dwell in the wood's grove
under an oak tree in the earth-cave.

Old is this hall in the earth; I am all worn out with longing.

There are dark valleys, high hills,

bitter enclosures overgrown with briars:

a dwelling place deprived of joy. Very often here the departure of my lord

cruelly laid hold of me. Beloved ones are on the earth,

loved ones living, occupying a bed,

while I walk alone at dawn

under the oak tree through these earth-dwellings.

There I must sit the summer-long day,

where I can only weep about my exile,

about many hardships; because of this I cannot ever

rest from the sadness of my heart,

or from all the longing which takes hold of me in this life.

The young man may always be sad in mind,

hard-hearted in thought, just as he must have
a happy appearance despite the grief in his breast
of a multitude of perpetual sorrows, whether it is that all his
joy in the world is at his own disposal, or whether far and wide
he is outlawed in a distant country, so that my beloved sits
under rocky cliffs assaulted by a storm,
a lord sat at heart, surrounded by water,
in a dismal hall. My beloved suffers
much mental torment; he remembers too often
a more joyful dwelling. It is misery for those who, longing,
have to wait for a loved one.

APPENDIX B

Wulf and Eadwacer

Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife.

Willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð.

Ungelic is us.

Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.

Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworþen.

Sindon wæltreowe weras þær on ige.

Willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð.

Ungelice is us.

Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode,

þonne hit wæs renig weder, ond ic reotugu sæt,

þonne mæc se beaducafa bogum bilegde-

wæs me wyn to þon; wæs me hwæpre eac lað.

Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine

seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas

murnende mod, nales meteliste.

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp

bireþ wulf to wuda.

Þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,

uncer giedd geador.

Wulf and Eadwacer

The following is Michelle Thiebaux's translation of the text.

For my clan he would be like a gift of booty—
they will waste him if he crosses their path.
With us it isn't like that.

Wulf is on one island, I on another—
his island is made fast, girded by fens.
Fierce men are on that island.
They will waste him if he crosses their path.
With us it isn't like that.

I yearned for Wulf in his harried wandering.
When the weather poured rain I sat here in tears.
When the brash fighter folded me in the branches of his arms,
I felt pleasure, yes, but I felt loathing too.

Wulf, my Wulf, to think about you
made me faint with sickness, for you seldom came.
It was my mood of mourning, not want of food.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf carries our forlorn

whelp to the wood.

Men can easily wrench apart what has never been wedded—

our story together.

Wulf and Eadwacer

The following is Elaine Treharne's translation of the text.

It is to my people as if someone would give him a gift.

They will consume him if he comes into their troop.

It is different with us.

Wulf is on an island, I on another.

That island is secure, surrounded by fen.

There are bloodthirsty men on the island.

They will consume him if he comes into their troop.

It is different with us.

I pursued in my hopes the far journeys of Wulf,

when it was rainy weather, and I sat, sorrowful.

Then the battle-bold one laid his arms around me:

there was joy to me in that; yet it was also hateful to me.

Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes of you

have made me sick, your rare visits,

a mourning mind, and this is not at all from lack of food.

Do you hear me, Eadwacer? The wolf bears our wretched whelp

to the woods

That may be easily separated which was never bound,

the riddle of us two together.

APPENDIX C

Beowulf, Seamus Heaney's translation, ll. 1070-1125

Hildeburh had little cause to credit the Jutes:

Son and brother, she lost them both on the battlefield.

She, bereft and blameless...waylaid by grief,

Hoc's daughter...

Hildeburh ordered her own son's body be burnt with Hnaef's,

The flesh on his bones to sputter and blaze beside his uncle's.

The woman wailed and sang keens, the warrior went up.

Carcass flame swirled and fumed, they stood round the burial mound and howled

As heads melted, crusted gashes spattered and ran bloody matter.

The glutton element flamed and consumed the dead of both sides.

APPENDIX D

Beowulf, Seamus Heaney's translation, ll. 2032-2060

“Think how the Heathobards will be bound to feel,
their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes,
when he walks in with that woman to the feast:
Danes are at the table, being entertained,
honoured guests in glittering regalia,
burnished ring-mail that was their hosts' birthright,
looted when the Heathobards could no longer wield
their weapons in the shield-clash when they went down
with their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives.
Then an old spearman will speak while they are drinking,
having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive
memories of the massacre; his mood will darken
and heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion,
he will begin to test a young man's temper
and stir up trouble...
And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing,
working things up with bitter words
until one of the lady's retainers lies
spattered in blood, split open

on his father's account. The killer knows
the lie of the land and escapes with his life.
Then on both sides the oath-bound lords
will break the peace, a passionate hate
will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride
will falter in him as the feud rankles.

APPENDIX E

The Seafarer, Elaine Treharne's translation, ll. 117-124

Let us consider where we might have a home,
and then reflect upon how we could come there
and then we may also strive so that we should come there
into that eternal blessedness,
where there is life to be obtained in the love of God,
hope in heaven. Thanks be to the Holy One
that he has exalted us, Prince of glory,
eternal Lord, through all time. Amen.

APPENDIX F

Beowulf, Seamus Heaney's translation, ll. 1258-1295

Grendel's mother,
Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
She had been forced down into fearful waters,
The cold depths, after Cain had killed
His father's son [...] and from Cain there sprang
Misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,
The banished and accursed, due to come to grips
With that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle.
The monster wrenched and wrestled with him
But Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength,
The wondrous gifts God had shadowed on him:
He relied for help on the Lord of All,
On His care and favour. So e overcame the foe,
Brought down the hell-brute [...] now his mother
Had Sallied forth on a savage journey,
Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.
Grendel's mother...had pounced and taken one of the retainers
In a tight hold, then headed for the fen.

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