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'Women are passive, the playthings of men or fate': discuss in relation to the texts you have read.

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In considering the question of female passivity in Anglo-Saxon England, the notable absence of women in surviving literature is somewhat foreboding. *Beowulf*[1] however, presents women in such a way that critics have been able to contest Overing's deduction that they 'are all marginal excluded figures'[2] by claiming the 'centrality of female characters to the poem'.[3] Preserved within the same manuscript, MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv, a fragment of *Judith*[4] elicits a similarly contradictory response towards its heroine; she is at once 'a heroine *sans peur et sans reproche*'[5] and a 'pious and passive instrument empowered and directed by God'.[6] This essay will thus progress by analysing the presentation and role of female characters in *Beowulf* and *Judith*, on the basis that both poems evidently offer material with which to challenge the suggestion that all women are passive.

A discussion of the presentation of women in Anglo-Saxon literature should primarily address the function of the selected texts. Munro Chadwick has proposed that the author of *Beowulf* designed it as a kind of 'Furstenspiegel' ('mirror of a prince')[7] and its predominantly aristocratic concerns, emphasised by the lack of any common people, lends credibility to such an argument. Swanton argues that 'from the first line, the extrametrical introductory 'Hwæt' ('Indeed' (B.1)) is suggestive of the noble origins of those whose exploits the poet is about to relate'.[8] The poet ensures that the women, including Grendel's Mother, are very much a part of this aristocratic picture by consistently using the word 'ides' in conjunction with them; the word is often used in Anglo-Saxon literature to describe women of status and breeding. The theme of the poem can thus be determined as the nature of heroic life, and more specifically, the function and character of leadership in the heroic society.[9]

The absence of the ordinary in *Judith* signifies the poet's similar preoccupation with presenting ideals of leadership. The focus is solely on the 'ealdor' (J.38)/'prince' Holofernes, and Judith, whose own noble status is confirmed by the presence of her 'foregenga' (J.127)/'maid'. The maid's silence and the fact that she remains unnamed is significant in this respect as it ensures the poem's focus remains solely on Judith. Like Beowulf who has

[1] Michael Swanton, ed., *Beowulf* (Manchester: Uni. Press, 1997). Further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.
[2] Gillian R. Overing, 'A Context for Interpretation' in Peter S. Baker, ed., *The Beowulf Reader* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000)
[3] Dorothy Carr Porter, 'The Social Centrality of Women in Beowulf' in John Hill (ed.) *The Heroic Age: Issue 5* (Summer/Autumn 2001)
[4] Richard Hamer, ed., 'Judith' in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970). Further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.
[5] Albert S. Cook, ed., 'Introduction' in *Judith* (Boston: Heath and Co., 1904)
[6] Tracey-Anne Cooper, 'Judith in Late Anglo-Saxon England' in Kevin Brine et al., eds., *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010)
[7] H. Munro Chadwick, 'The Heroic Age, An Excerpt' in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Indiana: Uni. of Notre Dame Press, 1983)
[8] 'Introduction' in Swanton (1997)
[9] Ibid.

Grendel's head carried to Heorot by four men (see B.1635-49), Judith has her maid carry Holoferne's head back to Bethulia and commands her to display it. Significantly, the narrative appears concerned only to relate Judith's directive: 'þá séo gléawe hét…hyre ðínnene' (then the wise lady ordered…her handmaid (J.171) and her subsequent speech to the crowd: 'Hér gé magon sweotole…/ on ðæs lāðestan/ hæðenes heaðorinces hēafod starian' ('Here can you clearly…gaze on the loathsome head of the heathen' (J.177)). There is no description of the maid removing the head yet Judith's speech makes it obvious she has done so. That the poet does not consider it necessary to detail the minutiae of the maid's actions here emphasises her absolute obedience; her presence serves predominantly to emphasise her mistress's authority. As *Judith* establishes, the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with ideals of leadership was not limited to masculine positions. The didactic comments in *Beowulf* in relation to female behaviour such as 'Ne byð swylc cwēnlic ðēaw/ idese tō enfanne' (Such a thing is no queenly custom for a lady to practise (B.1940-1)) likewise indicate that whilst it is plausible to consider the poem as a mirror, we must recognise the queen and princess alongside the prince in the image it reflects.

We have established that these particular poems are not concerned with representing the lives of ordinary women and we must consequently consider the question of their passivity in respect of their public roles. The importance of custom in Anglo-Saxon society is evidenced by the comment accompanying Wulfgar's particular approach of Hrothgar: 'cuÞe he duguðe Þeaw' (he knew the custom of the company (B.359)). As figureheads of society these women have specific duties, as Maxims I illustrates they must primarily give gifts: 'rúm-heort béòn/ méarum and máðmum'[10] ('be liberal with horses and treasure') and the poet confirms the active commitment of Wealhtheow, Hygd and Freawaru to this duty: 'oft hio beahwriðan/ secge sealed, ær hie to setle geong' ('often she presented a twisted circlet to a man before she went to her seat' (B.2018-19)). She is also responsible for distributing drink to the company and her control in this process is emphasised through directives such as 'Onfoh Þissum fulle' ('Take this goblet' (B.1169)). Sklute considers the function of women to be 'making peace by weaving to the best of her art a tapestry of friendship and amnesty'[11] and by distributing drink to each warrior in turn, she literally fulfils that objective. Her role in the heroic society should thus be perceived as an active one, as Enright surmises: 'her ritual and ministrations would seem too closely tied to the maintenance and existence of the group'[12] to consider her otherwise.

The role of women in preserving peace is not limited to her actions in the hall. As Beowulf's ominous prediction of Freawaru's marriage highlights, a women was often the means by which Anglo-Saxon families sought to preserve peace with potential rivals: 'Þæt hē mid ðy wife wælfæhða dæl,/ sæcca gesette' ('that, by means of this woman, he should settle a great number of deadly feuds, of conflicts' (B.2028-9)). Though the words 'freoðuwebbe'/'friðusibb' ('peace-weaver') are used sparingly, appearing only in relation to Wealhtheow (B.2017) and Thrytho (B.1941), the poet's preoccupation with documenting marriage details between nations lends credibility to Overing's argument that 'the peace-weaver is the primary designated female role in *Beowulf*'.[13]

Women are consistently portrayed as the bonds of peace and stability, the persons who above all try to ensure that the glory and power of one generation shall be passed on to the next.[14] Wealhtheow's speech following Hrothgar's attempted adoption of Beowulf

[10] Louis Rodrigues, trans., *Maxims I*, at http://colecizj.easyvserver.com/porodch2.htm <17.04.2012>
[11] Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, 'Gender Roles' in Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds., *A Beowulf Handbook* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997)
[12] Michael Enright, *Lady With a Mead-Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1995)
[13] Hennessey Olsen (1997)
[14] E. Carrigan, 'Structure and Thematic Development in "Beowulf"' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, Vol. 66 (1967/68) pp. 1-51

emphasises her commitment to the system of inheritance by blood, 'ond Þinum magum læf/ folc ond rice, Þonne ðu forð scyle ('bequeath people and kingdom to your kinsmen' (B.1178-9)). Strauss considers 'speech in itself as a form of action, belying its own apparent passivity';[15] by publicly asserting the rights of her sons' to the Danish throne, Wealhtheow therefore demonstrates the necessity of active participation in heroic society in order to succeed as a peace-weaver. Though her directives to both Hrothgar and Beowulf remain unanswered, this is not to say her advice goes unheeded. Sisam suggests that 'Beowulf simply has none of the quick exchanges that make dialogue'[16] and she continues to speak regardless, finally expressing her conviction that the retainers 'doð swa ic bidde' ('will do as I ask' (B.1231)). Despite the connotations of Wealhtheow's name ('foreign slave'), Beowulf's reference to her as a 'mæru cwen' ('renowned queen' (B.2016)) implies that her confidence in her authority is not unfounded. Her efforts to secure a lasting peace for the Danes by preserving the blood line contrast starkly with Beowulf's own - his futuristic vision is concerned solely with the perpetuation of his name through the construction of 'Biowulfes biorh' ('Beowulf's barrow' (B.2807)). He has not married so has no son to bequeath his kingdom to and his people are consequently fated to 'wen/orleghwile' ('expect a period of war' (B.2910-11)). Though the poet stresses that women alone are unable to ensure peace after the death of a prince: 'Þeah seo bryd duge!' ('worthy though the bride may be' (B.2031)), Beowulf's last words emphasise that their complete absence ensures the end of a heroic race. Lamenting his lack of a biological heir he tells Wiglaf: 'Þu eart endelaf uses cynnes,/ Wægmundinga' ('you are the last of my race, the Wægmundings' (B.2814)). The poet thus effectively emphasises the importance of women's active involvement in heroic society in order to ensure its perpetuation.

As Hildeburgh's tragic story illustrates, many noble husbands were killed fighting battles, and we have to assume that there were many widows or married women who had to step in on behalf of dead or absent husbands. Judith appears as a shining example of 'good lordship' for these tumultuous times, she is wise not rash, brave but not foolhardy.[17] After killing Holofernes she leaves immediately and does not return to the heathen camp, leading Oswald to claim that 'most telling of Judith's inability to act within the confines of her own kingdom is that she cannot lead her men into battle'.[18] I disagree and consider that by remaining at home, Judith reflects a sensibility becoming to her position. That she has no false pretensions regarding her strength is evident from her tactical repositioning of Holofernes' body when she 'listum ālēde, lāðne mannan,/ swā hēo ðæs unlædan ēaðost mihte/ we gewealdan' ('skilfully placed the evil hated wretch/ As she might best have power over him' (J.101-3)). The artful repetition of the verb 'slōh' ('struck') in half-lines with clearly similar rhythm and structure ('slōh ðā wundenlocc…slōh ðā eornoste' – 'the curly-haired one struck…earnestly struck' (J.103,108)) additionally heightens the sense of her double-hacking and physical weakness.[19] There is no need, therefore, for Judith to accompany the warriors to battle; the enemy troops are now leaderless and 'medowērige' ('drunken with mead' (J.229, 245)), a point again emphasised by its repetition. Their defeat appears inevitable and Judith's decision to remain within the confines of Bethulia appears consequently to be guided primarily by a sense of practicality rather than any societal constraint.

[15] Barrie Strauss, qtd in Hennessey Olsen (1997)
[16] Kenneth Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford Uni. Press, 1965)
[17] Cooper (2010)
[18] Dana M. Oswald, 'Learning to be Civil, Citizen Judith and Old English Culture' in Gerald A. Hauser and Amy Grim, eds., *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civil Engagement* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004)
[19] Richard North and Joe Allard, eds., *Beowulf and Other Stories* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007)

By staying at home, Judith elicits similar criticism from Cooper who argues that she is 'a passive agent of God and not a brave warrior herself'.[20] However, in sending her men to battle she is not dissimilar to Hrothgar who 'gēoce gelyfde' ('counted on help' (B.609)) from Beowulf to slay the enemy of his people whilst he 'gewat…ut of healle' (left the hall (B.863)). The text is explicit in insisting that Hrothgar was not criticised for his passivity: 'Ne hie huru winedrihten with ne logon' ('Nor did they reproach their friend and leader' (B.862)) and Hygelac's reference to him as a 'maerum ðeodne' ('famous prince' (B.1992)) shows that his reputation remains intact. Judith appears markedly less passive than the Danish king as she must persuade her men to battle whereas Beowulf arrives at Heorot on his own accord already determined to fight for Hrothgar. Lucas has commented that as a woman, Judith cannot even order men to prepare for battle as a male commander would, rather she must request it:[21] 'Nu ic gumena gehwæne/ Þyssa burglēoda biddan wylle,/randwiggendra' ('Now I wish to pray to every man among the citizens' (J.185)). Rather than detracting from Judith's heroic role, however, her speech emphasises her dynamism; in spite of the social limitations imposed on women, she still manages to successfully incite her men to war. She does not explicitly express authority over them, yet the poet's use of the word 'snelra' ('quickly' (J.199)) to describe their actions in response to her speech affirms her influence.

Though *Beowulf* was written by a Christian scribe, the frequent references to 'wyrd' or 'fate' illustrates the persistence of pagan traditions at the time of composition. In *Judith*, Brincker recognises that whilst there is no occurrence of the pagan goddess of Fate (Wyrd), there are several allusions to the fact that no one can escape from her governance. Christian and pagan conceptions are at one in this for according to both, life is granted to man in fee for a limited time.[22] The concept of fate, then, remains discernible in the sense of pre-destination that colours both poems. The powerlessness of women against it is evident in Hildeburgh's failure to end the blood-feud between the Danes and the Frisians: 'Hōces dohtor/ meotodsceaft bemearn syÞðan morgen cōm' ('Hoc's daughter mourned the decree of fate' (B.1076-7)). Beowulf's fatalistic prediction of Freawaru's marriage, in its parallels with the Finn episode ('Þonne bioð abrocene on ba healfe/ aðsword eorla' ('Then the sworn oaths of the warriors will be broken on both sides' (B.2063-4)), appears to emphasise the inevitably of her similarly tragic fate. In *Judith*, the blind and inexorable power of fate has noticeably been replaced by the omnipotence of a divine Ruler;[23] however, whilst the concept may have been coloured by Christianity, the actions of our heroine remain equally determined by it: 'Hæfde ða gefohten foremærne blæd/ Iūdith æt gūðe, swā hyre God ūde' ('Then in the fight had Judith won herself outstanding glory, as God had granted her' (J.12203)). It is this explicit dependency on God's will that prompts criticism of her passivity for she is unquestionably God's instrument, the 'Scyppendes mægd' ('handmaid of the saviour' (J.78)).

Though the texts establish women as playthings of fate, it is worth noting that 'wyrd' appears to be gender indiscriminate. In *Judith*, Holofernes is depicted as 'déofulcunda' ('the wicked one' (J.61)) so in light of the poem's didactic tone his preordained death is not altogether surprising: 'Þær hē sceolde his blæd forlēosan/ ædre binnan ānre nihte' ('where he was destined soon that very night to lose his life (J.63-4)). Beowulf, however, is truly 'æÞele' ('noble' (B.198)) yet 'swā him wyrd ne gescrāf hreð æt hilde' ('fate did not assign him triumph in battle' (B.2574-5)) and he ends up dying 'ofer willan' (against his will (B.2589)). Furthermore, his previous battle victories are shown to be just as much a manifestation of God's will as Judith's were; the poet emphasises that in the battle with Grendel's mother he would have fared badly had not 'hālig God/ gewēold wigsigor' ('holy God brought about

[20] Cooper (2010)
[21] Peter J. Lucas, '"Judith" and the Woman Hero' in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 22, *Medieval Narrative Special Number* (Modern Humanities Research Association, 1992)
[22] Brincker, qtd. in Eric Stanley, *Imagining the Anlo-Saxon Past* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000)
[23] Charles W. Kennedy, ed., *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940)

victory in battle' (B.1553-4)). Whilst the victories and defeats of Judith and Beowulf may have been predetermined, it is worthwhile remembering that they have been actively courageous in their initial decisions to fight evil- Judith has already risked her life and is poised with the drawn sword *before* she prays to God for assistance. The vitality of these heroes is accentuated by the poets' portrayal of the inactivity of their people: when Beowulf battles the dragon his men 'on holt burgon,/ ealdre burgan' ('turned to the woods, saved their lives' (B.2598-9)), whilst the passivity of Judith's people is indicated by the verb 'sittan' ('to sit'): 'wiggend sæton' 'there warriors sat' (J.141)). Beowulf has not been dismissed by critics as a passive instrument of God, and neither should Judith; as he is very much considered the 'gōd guðcyning' ('great war-king' (B.2563)), she should equally be respected as the 'mægð modigre' ('courageous maid' (J.335)).

I have likened Judith's actions to those of men and the exploits of Grendel's Mother offer a similar scope for comparison. Stephen Atkinson has noted that 'her role is a perversion of the role of thane'[24] and it is true that her actions in avenging her son are in accordance with the Anglo-Saxon revenge code. Though the reluctance of her journey is emphasised by the word 'sorhfulne' ('full of misery' (B.1278)), by upholding the values of the comitatus she does arrogate to herself the masculine role of the warrior or lord.[25] Whilst she is unlike Hildeburgh in this respect, she is not entirely 'violating the larger principles of society'[26] as White has suggested; the Anglo-Saxons allowed women to own land and manage households,[27] so her active fulfilment of the typically male responsibilities occasioned by such a role is not altogether surprising. Beowulf's description of her water-mere as a 'niðsele' ('hostile hall' (B.1512)) additionally encourages us to consider Grendel's Mother in a masculine capacity - the power of the hall as a poetic image is attested throughout Anglo-Saxon literature; it appears as the practical and emotional centre of heroic society, all that a man could wish for.[28] We are told that she has ruled her hall without incident for 'hund missera' ('one hundred seasons' (B.1498)) as Hrothgar had done before Grendel attacked (B.1769), and as Beowulf had before the dragon appeared (B.2209). Through this repetition, the reign of Grendel's Mother becomes associated with that of the famous kings and emphasises her competence as a ruler; she does not appear as the plaything of men, but akin to them.

The language used to refer to the female protagonists in *Beowulf* and *Judith* enables us to better determine the extent of their passivity. In the three key moments when God's presence is emphasised in *Judith* (J.1-7, 82-108,121-124) she is depersonalised and referred to, with a single exception (J.123), only by the pronoun.[29] Stripped of her name, she loses her individuality and her involvement in Holofernes' death is thus more readily dismissed when God is named as the active participant (J.123). Similarly, by the final lines of the Finn episode, Hildeburgh is no longer referred to by name but as 'drihtlice wīf' ('noble lady' (B.1158)). In the poet's penultimate reference to her as 'seo cwen numen' (the queen taken (B.1153)), he not only strips her of any unique identity but additionally emphasises her passivity through making her the subject of a passive verb form. She is subsequently listed alongside the 'ingesteald' ('household property') which is 'to scypon feredon…to Denum feredon' ('carried off to the ships…carried off to the Danes' (B. 1154-4)). Orchard considers the parallelism of the phrasing here to be deliberate, plausibly arguing that it 'surely only

[24] Qtd. in Judy Anne White, *Hero-Ego in Search of Self: A Jungian Reading of Beowulf* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004)
[25] Jane Chance, 'Grendel's Mother as Epic Anti-Type of the Virgin and the Queen' in Robert Dennis Fulk (ed.), *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology* (Indiana Uni. Press, 1991)
[26] White (2004)
[27] Ruth Johnston Staver, *A Companion to Beowulf* (CT: Greenwood Press, 2005)
[28] Swanton (1997)
[29] Cooper (2010)

underlines Hildeburgh's reduction in status to a mere trophy'.[30] The poet implies that this objectification of women as war trophies is not limited to the upper echelons of Anglo-Saxon society; at Beowulf's lay a Geatish woman laments the prospective 'hynðo ond hæftnyd' ('humiliation and captivity' (B.3155)) she faces in the event of an army invasion. The women of the poem clearly recognise their physical powerlessness against the intentions of male warriors and this inevitably comes across as passivity.

In the character of Thrytho, the poet portrays a striking contrast to Hildeburgh; by killing any man that 'eagum starede' ('looked on her with his eyes' (B.1935)), she is the only woman in *Beowulf* to actively defy her objectification. Her extreme behaviour has been interpreted by Overing as a 'refusal to be held in the masculine gaze'[31] and whilst I agree, I believe that her power should be considered in terms of her unchallenged royal status: she has the protection of her father, has not been subjected to the terror or force of hostile soldiers, and these men are the 'swæsra gesiða' ('dear companions' (B.1934)) of her own people. Significantly, in her marriage to Offa, Thryhto goes on to demonstrate her obedience to her father's will and is shown to conform to the directions of men above her status. Ultimately then, her outlandish conduct actually serves to emphasise the universality of female passivity as the poet juxtaposes it with details of her ready submission to masculine bidding.

We have established that men and women are equally the playthings of fate, yet it is not so easy to accept the charge of women as the passive playthings of men. We can determine initially that the poets of *Judith* and *Beowulf* are not wholly reluctant to assign active roles to women; they both present worlds in which women have the potential to enjoy lives of relative independence within their own kingdoms. The attribution of specifically aggressive actions to female protagonists however, is not something they appear comfortable doing: in *Judith*, the actual beheading of Holofernes is attributed to God whilst in *Beowulf* Thrytho ultimately renounces her violent habits and conforms to societal expectations, becoming 'gode mære' ('famous for virtue' (B.1951)). The most active female presence is undeniably Grendel's Mother yet despite being identified as female three times in quick succession as soon as she is introduced: *modor, ides, aglæcwif* (mother, woman, female warrior (B.1258-1259)), the first time a pronoun is used of her it is grammatically masculine[32] ('sē' – he (B.1260)). She is not a plaything of men but her conduct means that she is no longer considered as a woman. The poems reveal that women cannot attempt the aggressive actions of men and continue to be regarded as female. Nonetheless, the emphasis both place on the lesser female strength (Judith's physical weakness and the 'læssa' ('less' (B.1282)) terror of Grendel's Mother) suggest that we should consider the continual female acquiescence to men not as an indication of their passivity, but of their physical powerlessness to do otherwise.

[30] Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003)
[31] Overing quoted in Hennessey Olsen (1997)
[32] Orchard (2003)

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