Subverting Looming Disaster: Weaving as Power Motif Across Classical, Old English, and Norse Myth
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Abstract

The mythic motif of weaving often depicts women exerting control over their surroundings through cunning and skill. Contrary to perceptions of weaving as constrained action in classical myth, however, weaving in Old English and Norse myth connotes a metaphor of oral storytelling, embedded in the Icelandic term “Þáttr,” meaning both “short story” and “thread.” As a result, weaving in Old English and Norse myth often provides a space for women to influence wars from the loom. By examining classical, Old English, and Old Norse myth, we can better understand how weaving, speaking, and power intertwine within ancient power dynamics.

Keywords

Weaving, Oral Storytelling, Classical Epic, Old English

Despite the widespread evidence of weaving in ancient daily life, the craft has left barely any archaeological trace. The ancient tradition of crafting, most often carried down through family lines, creates a tenuous yet unbroken line of knowledge, occasionally interrupted through disinterest or forgetfulness. The stories of such times are preserved in the same manner.¹ For instance, the oral tradition of storytelling requires both an attentive ear and a willing student to keep the stories alive. It is therefore no surprise that these two skills would be compared to each other as complementary forces of creation and expression across different communities. Nevertheless, the broad generalization of weaving as a women’s craft and the manifestation of weaving as a motif in heroic epics or family sagas complicates a sweeping reading of the “text/textile” parallel, as termed by Maren Clegg Hyer (2019). When

¹ Despite all our technologies today, this fragile transfer of knowledge remains today.
weaving, speaking, and creating are regarded as different facets of the same idea---that of manipulating reality to suit the artisan’s will---then notions of power, importance, and wealth also change along with considerations of gender and politics. The characters of Helen of Troy, Brynhild the Valkyrie, and Wealhtheow interact with weaving materially, textually, and metaphorically in their searches for victory and peace, each representing a mythic tradition’s conceptions of femininity. Their actions reveal cultural systems of power and provide a glimpse into the gender expectations and roles of their times, all of which contribute to the contemporary understanding of craft, composition, and power within literature.

Before discussing weaving as a metaphor for both speech and fate in each mythic tradition, it will be helpful to survey the different methods and terminologies related to weaving. To begin, Marta Hoffman’s *The Warp-Weighted Loom* (1964) explains the history of the tool and its continued use in Scandinavian countries. Although her research is based in Norway, Hoffman finds evidence for widespread use of the loom across Europe, including in Greece and the British Isles. The warp-weighted loom, she argues, is not an instrument for infrequent or casual use. Its large beams took up a lot of the space in a standard contemporaneous Norwegian home, which means the work could not be packed away unfinished. As Hoffman suggests, these production factors combined with the large quantity of materials needed to make a blanket or rug often required a whole host of people to work together. The weavers would thread the shuttle through the bound warp, which was sewn first to the top beam and held taut by weights. They then moved the heddle, a horizontal stick onto which certain warp threads were sewn, which allowed a wider variety of patterns. The loom required the warp to be fully set before the shuttle introduced the weft, meaning that the warp’s patterns limited the variety of weft patterns possible in the piece. While classical and Norse myth often imply that weaving was the work of one woman, they also associate weaving and embroidery with wealthy women, who surely would have had servants to aid them with such tasks. With this knowledge, the presence of weaving in mythic literature as a metaphor for both creation and society becomes clear.
Weaving is a known skill within most cultures which promotes a sense of community through the collaborative production of a piece of fabric. Because of its many intricacies, the mythical motif of weaving can represent many things. As a cumbersome, time-consuming craft necessary for the continued function of ancient societies, its value is highly appreciated in the literature of its time. For instance, Arachne’s contest with Athena could utilized any fibrous material to explain the origin of the spider, but layers of complexity are added to the story by the visual elements of both women’s tapestries (as opposed to a story in which they both simply spin yarn). Likewise, the visual elements built from the repetitive, conscious movement of the shuttle mimic the oral tradition in all of these cultures, which builds on different repetitive memory aides such as epithets and kennings to adapt the meter to the bard’s improvisational skills. As a parallel to poetry, weaving becomes the material way to communicate a story and preserve a community’s glory for future generations.

Moreover, weaving also naturally lends itself to allegories of fate. As Miriam Mencej’s article “Connecting Threads” (2011) demonstrates, birth, death, and the course of life are associated with the manipulation of raw fiber into a finished textile in European folklore. As spinning and weaving are usually connected with feminine duties including childrearing, weaving metaphors demonstrate the creative and narrative aspects of female life in such societies. The weaver becomes akin to Fate herself, much like the Greek Moirae and the Roman Parcae, who spin the thread of life. While spinning precedes weaving in the construction of textiles, both acts are often linked to the domestic feminine sphere and demonstrate the varied skills needed to produce an intricate piece of cloth. As the weaver maneuvers the shuttle through a set warp to produce a finished, storied creation, she builds on her previous work and remains constrained by her choices in spinning the thread and setting the warp on the loom. As a symbol for society, storytelling, and fate, weaving thus exhibits an impressive range of power associated with negotiation and creation, values which are also conferred to the weaver herself.
Weaving across Communities: Comparisons across Classical, Old Norse, and Old English Texts

Culturally, societies are themselves rarely disconnected, being woven together by trade, conquest, and travel. The relationship between classical and Old English texts is easily shown through archaeological evidence of the Roman invasion of Britain and historical accounts from Tacitus, Julius Caesar, and Bede the Venerable. The Anglo-Latin tradition of English monks writing local histories and hagiographies in foreign Latin provides evidence for this connection in literary reality. Maren Clegg Hyer’s article on the concept of “word-weaving” and its acceptance into Old English culture reveals the double meaning of Latin words like texere (to weave; to write) and ordior (to lay out a warp; to begin a work) as a possible origin for the metaphor in Old English poetry, such as in Cynewulf’s Elene when “wordcræftum wæf ond wundrum læs (he wove with word-craft and chose wonders)”2. Nevertheless, she argues that “simply conflation or borrowing presupposes a simple, unidirectional relationship that ignores time, space, language, and material culture” (2019, p. 35). The separation between classical and Old English cultures through time, space, language, and environment denies a simple relationship between the two cultures, which is mediated through the Roman empire’s expansion into both places. John Leyerle’s article on the interlaced structure of Beowulf argues a similar point. There, he finds a connection between the material art of interlaced designs in illuminated manuscripts and the narrative structure of the epic, which often interrupts present action to describe past or future events that relate thematically to the present moment (1967). Because the structure and linguistics of Old English stories aided the metaphor, word-weaving was able to survive in Old English texts.

This connection between classical and Old English writing, however, extends far beyond form and structure. Victoria Wodzak’s article, “Of Weaving and Warriors: Peace and Destruction in the Epic Tradition” (1998), compares Wealththeow and Andromache as examples of how epic poetry upholds weaving as the woman’s archetypal duty of

2 Cynewulf, Elene, 1237.
preserving culture through the promotion of peace, as opposed to the man’s duty of waging war. Similarly, Maria Pantelia’s article, “Spinning and Weaving: Ideas of Domestic Order in Homer” (1993), suggests that the typical Homeric woman selects a chore that either provides security and stability behind a loom or allows her freedom of movement with a drop spindle, depending on her family’s stability. While a loom’s size and weight require a woman to remain in one spot to weave and could erect a barrier between her and others, the small size of a drop spindle allows a woman to sit anywhere and possibly multitask while spinning wool. Finally, Reyes Bertolín’s “The Mast and the Loom” (2008), argues that both the mast and the loom allow men and women respectively to wield their gendered power and prevent the other from taking control of them.

In addition to the connection established above between form and subject matter in classical and Old English texts, Pantelia’s and Bertolín’s observations also provides a space in which to find distinctions and overlaps in gendered power dynamics in both literary cultures.

The potential overlap of values between Old Norse myth and Old English literature are often debated. On the one hand, C. E. Wright (1939) finds ample evidence for an Icelandic influence on Old English histories like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. On the other, Heather O’Donoghue (2014) cautions against overzealous conflation, arguing that many of the comparisons between these two traditions are speculative and not indicative of adaptation in either culture, particularly in later works such as The Canterbury Tales or Hamlet. However, O’Donoghue does admit to certain similarities between Beowulf and other Icelandic sagas, such as Snorri Sturluson’s description of Ragnarök, in which civilizations similarly fight to their deaths in endless, fantastical wars. Jesse L. Byock (1998) makes further claims concerning the origins of the character Beowulf, who is similar to other Icelandic characters like Bödvar Bjarki with his immense, bearlike strength that allows him to dominate the battlefield (1998). Both scholars thus regard the Norse family sagas as the connecting link between Old English epic and Norse saga in tracing possible similar historical events in both cultures. Similarities between names such as Attila and Atli and between events such as Atli’s betrayal of Gunnar and the sack of Gundaharius’s land, strongly suggest that
Icelandic family sagas are adaptations of history as much as translations of myth (Byock, 1990). These similarities between Old Norse and Old English texts implies the consistent position of weaving in Old English epic as a symbol of power alongside domesticity when read carefully alongside Old Norse myth.

In light of this scholarship, the commonalities between cultures are apparent, though some are less clear than others. However, while each culture may show a similar attitude towards weaving, gender, and duty, this does not necessarily suggest any obvious interaction between these cultures. While exploring the connections between these cultures allows us to consider Western literary traditions in a different light, it is ultimately the distinctions between these cultures that provides the most vital information for continuing this study across other communities. Lastly, as the chosen characters illustrate how weaving motifs portray power in myth, their comparison affords insight into each tradition’s culture rather than any interaction between them.

**Helen Weaving History: Storytelling through Cloth**

The first concrete example of weaving as a metaphor for power comes from classical Greece. Helen’s behavior in the *Iliad* represents her own position beyond being a mere object of desire. Helen confronts her identity as an unfaithful wife through blunt disparagement, declaring herself a whore and referring to her life before the war as a dream (3.218-219). When she is not observing the war from the battlements, Helen dedicates her days to weaving a robe which depicts the warfare on the plains, physically creating an unsettling image of the consequences of her actions (3.151-154). The robe functions as a symbol of her current life, in which her safety hangs in the balance of the war’s future outcome. Her choice of image differs drastically from Andromache’s, who is later depicted weaving flowers when Hector dies (22.514-518). Pantelia (1993) interprets Helen’s presence at the loom as both safeguard and confinement. Without a stable future, Helen is physically unmoored, and thus steadies herself at the loom, “fulfil[ling] her need to overcome death by producing an artifact which will survive and ‘tell her story,’ her kleos, to all future generations” (p. 495). As the object of desire that spurred on
the Trojan War, Helen's awareness of her own social situation prompts her to create patterned fabric, fulfilling the traditional role of a wife, which simultaneously reflects the martial chaos surrounding her.

Pantelia also notes the relationship between weaving and wordplay in Homeric epic. She argues that "Helen, as a woman, acquires a voice and identity, [...] only through the creativity of her weaving. Like an epic poet who preserves through his song the glorious deeds of his heroes, Helen weaves on her loom the story of the war" (1993, p. 495). Beyond her mute weaving, however, Helen also displays a bard's skill throughout the Iliad. She names the Greek warriors to Priam, remarking that "now I see them all, the fiery-eyed Achaians, I know them all by heart, and I could tell their names..." (Il. 3.280-281). As well as serving to inform Priam of the names and ranks of the Greek warriors, Helen's conversations with Priam also aids the structural function of exposition in the epic. The bard uses Helen's voice to introduce the Achaians to anyone unfamiliar with the tale; Troy, after all, has been at war for nine years as the Iliad commences, and it is therefore doubtful that Priam would not have been aware of the different names of the Greek kings. While the catalogue of ships in Book Two has already introduced the listener to the Greek troops, Helen provides an alternate, outside perspective, revealing the best characteristics of each warrior even as she questions the absence of her brothers and claims to be as removed from the action as though watching it in a dream. As the mouthpiece of the bard, Helen is given the ability to create a more ambiguous perspective for the listener, unlike any other character in the epic. With this context in mind, her weaving is a physical version of the bard’s memory, interpreted by the viewer as well as by herself. As both the cause of the war and the creator of a robe displaying the war, Helen's actions in the narrative transcend the text and become metatextual as a storyteller within an epic. Through her verbal declarations of infidelity and the material recreation of the war she caused, Helen reflects the world around her and inserts herself into a unique position in the narrative of the story.

Helen is, of course, not the only weaver in Greek myth. Figures like Penelope, Clytemnestra, and Andromache all incorporate weaving into
their schemes and storylines. Helen, nevertheless, is unique in weaving the history and consequences of her actions into a visual tapestry. Her counterpart in the *Odyssey*, Penelope, explicitly weaves a funeral shroud only to undo her work at night, carefully maintaining a single moment rather than building a history or letting time pass (*Od. 2.100-118*). In the *Agamemnon*, by contrast, Clytemnestra weaves a red carpet for Agamemnon’s arrival but does not embed her family history into the fabric, creating instead an artifact of her bloody triumph paralleled by her axe. Andromache’s weaving strives to secure her own family’s safety, as Wodzak (1998) and Pantelia (1993) argue. As a reflection of the balance between masculine governance and feminine domesticity, Pantelia claims that “Andromache’s weaving, simultaneous with Hector’s defense of Troy, expresses her hope that if she takes care of her duties, Hector’s political and military success will also continue” (1993, p. 496). Hector’s last request to her corroborates this claim, as he asks her to “tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom, and keep the women working hard as well” (*Il. 6.585-587*).

In these ways, Penelope, Clytemnestra, and Andromache all weave within the frame of domestic family life, even when subverting the idyllic model of family loyalty. Conversely, Helen, who regards herself as faithless and alone in Troy, breaks from this model (*Il. 24.893-912*). Her ambivalent situation means that her weaving belongs either in the home of two different men or no home at all. Bertolín (2008) observes that Helen appears to chafe under her work at the loom and refuses to remain in this gendered space, as she often leaves her loom to watch the war with the old veterans (who, incidentally, are severed from their gendered roles, since they cannot participate in the fighting). From the battlements, Helen can recall the lineages of the heroes aloud; in the bedroom, she can fix their depictions into her weaving. As a woman set aside from the traditional, gendered spheres of masculine politics and feminine domesticity, Helen is free to transgress boundaries and adopt the powers of a bard. Her ability to explain the reality around her by

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3 The most famous of classical weavers, Arachne, neither weaves for her continued independence nor for her family’s security. Instead, she weaves for the same reasons that bards sing songs, including personal gain.
naming the Greek warriors coincides with her ability to create a physical, visual artifact of the war that can last much longer than the utterance of a bard’s song.

Nevertheless, Helen’s status as a narrator of her own story comes at a price. For she cannot see what the future holds, remains stuck in the eternal horror of the war, and confronts her uncertain fate at the loom as well as on the walls of Troy. While Helen can both act within and define the story, she cannot affect the outcome of the war and has no premonition of the future. Her remark to Priam on the battlements that “there was a world […] or was it all a dream?” (Il. 3.219) betrays her uncertainty about her future by projecting it onto her past, reflecting her unending and uncertain present.

Helen does, however, foretell premonitions of her future in verse. When Hector returns to Troy to ask for prayers and to visit his family, Helen berates her birth and Paris’ cowardice before lamenting

[...] Oh the two of us!
Zeus planted a killing doom within us both,
so even for generations still unborn
we will live in song. (Il. 6.423-6)

While she does not know exactly how the war will end, Helen is undoubtedly certain of her future as a character in a bard’s song. While warriors like Sarpedon mention the glory that will come from their bravery on the battlefield (Il. 12.374-381), Helen’s assertion that her story will continue through verse is unique in the epic. Out of all the characters, she alone possesses a sense of storytelling, centering the events of the epic on her actions and composing a history of the war in her own feminine handicraft. Helen is not privy to her own future, but she recognizes the story of which she is a part and seeks to tell that story to the other characters, aligning her weaving in the epic with the actions of a more traditional Hellenic bard.

**Brynhild Weaving Vengeance: Fate Tied to Memory**

In contrast to Helen, Brynhild from Icelandic saga often neglects oral storytelling in favor of prophecy and craft. While she features in only one
of many family sagas, Brynhild’s story is the most well-known today, thanks to Wagner’s Ring Cycle, which interprets the tale of Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer found in The Saga of the Völsungs. In myth, Norse women were tasked with ensuring their family’s survival, often by drastic and bloody means. Other female figures in this tale mix potions of forgetfulness, burn their enemies in their own halls, and feed their sons to their rapist husbands (Saga of the Völsungs). Nevertheless, the Valkyries are set aside as women who actively participate in war and prophesy their own ends, crossing gender divides through their renown in both war and weaving. While there appears to be more of a dichotomy between war and weaving in classical myth, Norse myth often conflates the two. In many cases, including Brynhild’s, the action of the story is dictated less by the outcomes of masculine warfare than by the consequences of female conversations and desires, often in the context of weaving.

Brynhild’s introduction in the text comes midway through The Saga of the Völsungs, after Sigurd has slain the dragon, eaten its heart, and uncovered his uncle’s deceit. In his wanderings, Sigurd finds Brynhild in a depthless sleep on an ancient battlefield, a divine punishment for taking victory over Odin’s favorite warrior (Saga of the Völsungs, p. 67). After Sigurd wakens her and she teaches him the wisdom of runes, she returns to her father’s house. Shortly afterwards, she is also praised as one who is “more skilled in handicraft than other women” and “stitched stories of the noble deeds that Sigurd had wrought” in gold thread (Saga of the Völsungs, p. 73). While her martial prowess defines her as a warrior alongside Sigurd, it is her skill in weaving and embroidery that also enables her to become a narrator, creating a material history of heroism that exists within the tale. While Helen is central to the Trojan War, she

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4. Signy, Sigurd’s aunt in The Saga of the Völsungs, notably also uses fiber craft to determine her sons’ capabilities and strength: she “tested them by stitching the cuffs of their kirtles to their hands, passing the needle through both flesh and skin” (43). She sends the sons who cried into the woods for her brother to kill (42), but the one who withstood the pain goes on to avenge the murder of Signy’s father.

5. Lena E. Norrmann in “Visual Poetry, Weaving Meaning: Micro Narratives in the Nordic Oral Tradition” (2005) argues that this practice of weaving a history occurs outside myth as well, as she found that the Överhogdal tapestry contains scenes from the
does not partake in the fighting herself and remains a recorder of its history; Brynhild, in contrast, participates in the heroic deeds that she later depicts.

Brynhild’s knowledge of the future also characterizes her actions within the saga. As a prophetess aware of the power of runes (which are specifically written characters of power), Brynhild often reminds people of their destinies. Soon after Sigurd renews his vows to marry Brynhild, she interprets her friend Gudrun’s dream as the history of their mutual ruin, foretelling, “To you will come Sigurd, the man I have chosen for my husband. Grimhild will give him bewitched mead, which will bring us all to grief. You will marry him and quickly lose him” (Saga of the Völsungs, p. 77). Despite this warning, the foreseen betrayals come to pass, implying that Nordic fate is somewhat fixed. Karen Bek-Pedersen’s article “Fate and Weaving: Justification of a Metaphor” confronts this apparent paradox by explaining that “the [Old Norse] ideology of fate [. . .] says that, through our choices, we reveal ourselves (which means that we do not create ourselves but we actualize the creations that we are)” through reactions to set events (2009, p. 28). The Norse idea of heroism is to confront the future and choose doom for the sake of fulfilling one’s duty to oneself and one’s family. Foreknowledge of cataclysm only heightens the hero’s renown.

As such, the Norse system of fate easily lends itself to weaving metaphors. While in the Orkneyinga Saga Sigurd’s mother mourns, “I would have kept you for a long time in my wool basket if I knew that you would live forever,” she also admits that “it is fate which rules, and not where a man is from; better to die with dignity than to live with shame”. It is very striking that Sigurd’s mother uses the image of a wool basket to reflect her own womb; Mencej argues that this reflects an understanding of a spun thread being a “fixed” or fated life, though it could also reflect

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Sigurd tale, though mostly emotional ones. She argues that this focus on relational tension in the story is evidence of a female storyteller.

6 Other women such as Signy and Gudrun certainly take charge of their futures, but they do so outside the battlefield. Brynhild is the only character referred to as a Valkyrie and acclaimed for her martial skill within the bounds of masculine warfare.

already-spun wool leaving a basket to be used in knitting or weaving (2001). Brynhild’s destruction of her tapestry reflects her own imminent end in a similar way. As the men in her family break their verbal vows, she breaks her version of Sigurd’s heroism, denying him glory while also dooming everyone involved (Saga of the Völsungs). Although Brynhild may not be able to change her circumstances, she does commit to her vows of marriage and honor in an exacting manner. Her respect for her given word reflects the power of runes and spoken actions alongside physical, violent actions in Norse myth, implying a connection between speaking and weaving as powerful acts.8

Nevertheless, Brynhild is not aware of her role as a character in the story in the same way that Helen is. While Helen’s foresight is limited to her role in the story of the Trojan War, Brynhild does not find a metatextual dimension to her role in the family saga. With regard to genre, this difference could be attributable to the slight distinctions between family saga and epic. Family sagas’ focus on individual relationships and the demands of revenge often requires characters to have a narrower perspective than epics do, since epics often convey national concerns. Nevertheless, the Iliad also contains prescient characters such as Achilles, who remarks that “two fates bear me on to the day of death” (Il. 9.499). In the Homeric epic, Achilles faces a choice of two distinct and overarching destinies of which he has foreknowledge: he must choose between sailing home to live a long but anonymous life and dying horribly for everlasting glory (Il. 9.500-505). Helen, likewise, knows only that her lasting glory will be her eternal shame. Brynhild, by contrast, also knows the precise details of her fate. She warns Sigurd of the dangers of breaking his vow more than once and does not express surprise at his treachery. Instead, her knowledge of the future is subordinated to the events of the story itself, implying that prophecy is not a greater power than her own martial or creative skills. Her actions in the face of foreknowledge prove her character, and just as Helen

8 J. L. Austin’s definition of illocutionary and perlocutionary language aids this understanding of language as action. While Brynhild does not kill Sigurd herself, she persuades Gunnar, her husband, to do so according to the word of the law. In both the persuasion and the invocation of the law, words and speech are just as consequential as physical shows of power.
laments her infidelity and its consequences, Brynhild reacts to her own broken vow with extreme vigilance towards the honor and safety of her own family.\textsuperscript{9}

\textit{Wealhtheow Weaving Peace: Speech as Tapestry}

Of all three traditions mentioned thus far, Old English writings incorporate the metaphor of weaving most closely into the style of poetic composition, telling stories in interlaced structures. Cynewulf's claim that he "wove with word-craft and selected marvels" also matches the feminine role of the “peace-weaver” in the Old English epic \textit{Beowulf}. Wealhtheow's marriage and exhortations position her as a symbolic tapestry in Heorot. As the wife of a tribal leader, Wealhtheow's duty is to engineer peace among the warriors of her own tribe and her husband's loyal attenders by producing rousing speeches, intricate treasures, or healthy heirs. Through her marriage and motherhood, she produces peace in the same way that her daughter, Freawaru, will become a \textit{frıpuwebb} through her future marriage to a different tribe.\textsuperscript{10} Jacek Olesiejko has recently proposed a reading of Wealhtheow as empowered yet restricted by her status as both treasure and treasure-bearer: "Wealhtheow ends up representing the symbol of her oppression that points to the provisional nature of her identity as a peace-weaver that is constructed through the operations [of] the masculine heroic code" (2014, p.120). Because of her past as an objectified treasure and the emphasis on this past displayed by her golden jewelry, Wealhtheow can appropriate male, heroic language for her exhortation but is not guaranteed success. Nevertheless, Olesiejko does not respond to Cavell's

\textsuperscript{9}Some Hellenic myths reflect on the wife’s duty to her family. Notably, Clytemnestra avenges Iphigenia’s death at the same time as she betrays her husband. One key difference between Hellenic and Norse myth here is that the latter justifies such actions as essential to the woman’s duty of preserving her family and does not emphasize broken loyalties between mother and child or wife and husband.

\textsuperscript{10}Medieval scholarship has long held that Wealhtheow's name ("foreign slave") indicated her status as a peace-bond in a political economy where men brokered peace through an exchange of women. However, recent scholarship like Leonard Neidorf's article "Wealhtheow and Her Name: Etymology, Characterization, and Textual Criticism" (2018) questions this characterization, given her father's status in the text as a Wulfing lord and the lack of characterizing names in the rest of the epic.
claim that the term friþuwebbe/a is not applied to Wealhtheow in the epic but rather to Thryth, who is introduced as the antithesis of a peace-weaver owing to her cruel judgments (Beowulf, ca. 975-1025/2000, In. 1940-1943). In her article, Cavell maintains that the term “peace-weaver” has become overused in recent scholarship such that the actual context of the term has been lost. As an originalist, she argues that the term is not so much associated with women as with high social standing and moral standards (2015, p. 372). According to this argument, friþuwebbe/a has clearly taken on a life of its own within recent scholarship. It can be regarded as an archetype based on the power of negotiation between heroic warriors, especially when the peacekeeper seeks to retain current leadership. Wealhtheow fits into this role well; in the middle of her ruined hall after Grendel’s ravages, she stands among perfect golden tapestries and urges her family to maintain lineage rights as she praises the other warriors and Beowulf. It is her only speech in the epic, but within forty lines she manages to advise her family, encourage her husband’s retainers, and flatter a foreign guest.

Wealhtheow’s speech forms much of her action and characterization within the epic. It is during this speech that she gives Beowulf his chainmail and torc, and the latter serves as an ornamental symbol of his prowess in battle until he confronts the dragon at the end of the epic. However, the speech is directed to the warriors in the hall and her own family as much as it is to Beowulf himself. Wealhtheow’s reminder to her husband and nephew to respect their family lineage ends with the following remark:

I expect that [Hrothulf] would wish to repay both our sons kindly, if he recalls all the pleasures and honors that we have shown him,
in our kindness since he was a child. (*Beowulf*, ca. 975-1025/2000, ln. 1184-1187)

While could be read as an ironic statement concerning Wealhtheow’s trust in her nephew, who was just introduced with his uncle as “their peace was still whole then, / each true to the other,” the echoes of the scop’s lay and Wealhtheow’s own awareness of the situation call for this statement to be interpreted as a wise warning (*Beowulf*, ca. 975-1025/2000, ln. 1164-1165). Furthermore, she reminds her lord of the duty he has to his own children soon after he has offered Beowulf the status of his son at heart, which implies providing for him and possibly extending his rights of lineage to the throne (*Beowulf*, ca. 975-1025/2000, ln. 946-950). While such a possibility is tenuous at best (Beowulf has his own lord Hygelac to honor), Wealhtheow’s speech reminds her lord and the rest of the warriors in the room of their social contract, cemented through treasure-giving for shows of honor.

When she turns to Beowulf, Wealhtheow’s speech alternates between praise for Beowulf’s accomplishments and pleas for his guidance and kindness towards her sons. Beyond mimicking interlaced structure, Wealhtheow takes the set warp of the conversation (the celebration of Beowulf’s recent victory) and adds a weft comprised of her desires and requests as Queen of the Danes. As she moves from general blessings of cleverness and boldness to her specific requests, she ties these virtues to his duty as a warrior:

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[... I wish you well with these bright treasures. Be to my sons kind in your deeds, keeping them in joys! Here each earl is true to the other, Mild in his heart, loyal to his liege-lord, The thanes united, the nation alert, The troop, having drunk at my table, will do as I bid. (*Beowulf*, ca. 975-1025/2000, ln. 1225-1231)
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By associating her sons with Beowulf’s material glory, she holds the thanes’ behavior as a model for Beowulf to follow. She connects her pleas to her recent speeches about Beowulf’s might and glory as well as to the Finnsburg episode so that her request for peace is inseparable from the
context of the other speeches. Wealhtheow positions herself as a potential Hildeburh, who could lose her sons and kin to an invader and may need a hero in the future. Wealhtheow’s rhetorical strategy thus supports Leyerle’s “interlacing” interpretation. Leyerle argues that interlaced structure is apparent at a metatextual or non-diegetic distance, but within the diegetic text, Wealhtheow chooses her words and moment carefully to match the scop’s story and to weave her own story. She is attuned to the Danes’ remaining dangers through her perspective on society and gives Beowulf the tools he will need to survive his imminent battle with Grendel’s mother. As a peace-weaver, Wealhtheow takes charge of a specific moment to enact change in her community through her carefully woven speech.

Comparing Wealhtheow’s words and actions with those of Brynhild and Helen reflects the power of wordplay in Old English literature. Wealhtheow’s power through speech reflects Helen’s own storytelling ability, but instead of inserting herself into the narrative, Wealhtheow creates a perfect vision of the Danes, one which becomes ironic with the threat of near doom through mortal revenge. She interlaces compliments, exhortations, and warnings into the same speech, giving each party its due praise as well as reminding them of their indiscretions at a vulnerable moment for the tribe.

Wealhtheow’s weaving also differs from Helen’s and Brynhild’s in both its form and formation. Although her speech is masterfully woven and she remains surrounded by tapestries and treasure she is never depicted actively weaving cloth like Helen or Brynhild. While this absence may seem to complicate her status as a weaver, it demonstrates that in Old English literature her speech is the same action as her weaving, which likely adorns the walls around her. By linking her speeches with weaving through the setting of the great hall covered in tapestries, Wealhtheow carries the metaphor of weaving in language to its extreme. Similarly, while Helen and Brynhild both weave their heroes’ stories at home into a lasting, interlocked artifact for anyone to read, curiously Wealhtheow only speaks publicly to the warriors. Her private, domestic life remains a mystery to the audience, and any material weaving she completes is not as important as her speeches are to the
poet. To the Old English poet, then, a peace-weaver is responsible for many different types of weaving, except for the material act of weaving that other female characters in different epics enjoy.

Wealhtheow’s complementary role in peace-weaving as treasure-giver reveals a further dimension to her power in addition to her spoken weaving, adding another material component to her duty. Just as Brynhild reigns on the battlefield and in the home, Wealhtheow often associates herself with war through her gifts of chainmail and armor. Considering the similarity of appearance and construction between chainmail and weaving, Old English poetry often relates the two as mirrored activities (Cavell, 2016). Riddles 35 and 56 from the Exeter Book describe a chainmail shirt and a weaving tool with terms of the other practice, demonstrating both warfare and fiber-work as related craft in the Old English mind. Many tapestries, including those in Heorot, also contained gold threads for decoration and splendor, further associating weaving with wealth and chainmail.12 As a peace-weaver, Wealhtheow gives treasure to those who find glory, which explains why she gives Beowulf a chainmail shirt for his victory over Grendel (Beowulf, ca. 975-1025/2000, ln. 1195). This shirt is arguably the same shirt that saves Beowulf’s life the next day in his fight with Grendel’s mother, whose claws and knife cannot pierce the mail (Beowulf, ca. 975-1025/2000, ln. 1503-1505, 1545). With these connections to wealth and warfare, Wealhtheow transcends gendered boundaries in similar ways to Helen and Brynhild, providing armor for heroes and speaking about their honor while being surrounded by weaving in a domestic space. In determining which warriors deserve certain gifts, Wealhtheow’s giving also takes on metatextual significance. Beowulf, who is the only named Geat and the focus of the epic, receives gifts alongside other notable Danes. Without Wealhtheow’s life-saving gift, Beowulf could not have become a hero of epic proportions. In bestowing woven prizes to her warriors, Wealhtheow designs peace and shapes the narrative by ensuring her heroes’ survival and her foes’ demise.

12 Notably, Brynhild also wove with gold, while Helen’s expensive thread was Tyrian purple.
Although she does not storm the field like Brynhild, Wealhtheow interacts with the mechanics of war on a closer scale than most Hellenic women, including Helen. Many epics contain the looming threat of a collapse between martial and domestic space, often conveyed by the destruction of the home through unchecked warfare. This same tension between war and home is the force which motivates Hector and the Trojans alike to fight and protect the safety of their homes. Brynhild’s presence both on battlefield and in the homestead, while blurring the boundary between war and home, also indicates her role as a dual personage who acts according to her surroundings. Wealhtheow, on the other hand, has no home safe from war. The ruined hall Heorot remains a sober reminder of Grendel’s nightly attacks, but the king and his warriors still gather in the ruin to strategize, feast, and honor one another. Wealhtheow’s presence, like the golden tapestries, creates a home amid warfare. While she cannot be removed from the battlefield since the war is within her own domestic sphere, Wealhtheow still can directly adjust the outcomes of the battle through speeches and gift-giving.

Unlike Helen and Brynhild, however, Wealhtheow has no special foreknowledge of her future or place within the tale. Her complicated, interlaced speech, in which she compares herself to Hildeburh, remains speculative. On one hand, she is proven correct by the narrator of the text, who confirms Hrothulf’s future treachery alongside his description of the feast. On the other, she cannot be certain of her people’s destruction. In fact, it is Beowulf who prophetically describes the eventual chaos that comes from Freawaru’s marriage, who shares this knowledge with his kin the Geats instead of the Danes. Nevertheless, the tragedy of Beowulf lies in the audience’s witness of both the destruction and the victories of the heroes simultaneously. The image of Wealhtheow standing among shining tapestries covering the ruined walls of her home remains a symbol of elegy throughout the poem, echoed in the wailing of the old Geat woman who sings Beowulf’s eulogy as the Geats prepare to be invaded.

All these notions of power, speech, fate, and creation mesh in the only active, material weaving metaphor in Beowulf. As the true arbiter of
justice, God appears in the poem explicitly as a weaver, not as a warrior or even a speaker. God himself “forgeaf / wigspeda gewiofu,” or “gave them [the Geats] / a web of victory” against Grendel in the Danes’ hall (Beowulf, ca. 975-1025/2000, L. 696-697). Through this “web of victory,” Beowulf is able to defeat Grendel and actualize his boasting while ensuring a future safe from the monster’s nightly raids. While the precise identity of God is somewhat obscured by the coexistence of both Christian and pagan philosophies in the poem, the choice of the weaving motif for an omnipotent deity’s actions on Earth links the connection metaphysically, especially as it is the only explicit image of weaving in action in the poem.

The weaving metaphor also reveals the craft as an activity which exists outside gendered roles and expectations in Old English culture. Wealhtheow does not weave simply because she is a woman, while God adjusts the frame of his creation on Earth in a logical way outside his gendered duty. As the perfect example of weaving in Beowulf, God’s choices become unalterable, constraining the liberty of Wealhtheow and other heroes who try to weave their way into victory and peace. While Wealhtheow (like Brynhild and Helen) is a mortal being with a propensity for failure, the omnipotent God of Beowulf cannot make a mistake in his design. Selecting characters and their actions just as a weaver manipulates her pattern, God constructs the tale for the Old English bard, tying divine power to material handicraft as the explanation for martial outcomes. God’s role in Beowulf is the perfect representation of the similarity between fiber craft, speech, and fate as

13 God’s perfect power over creation seems to have roots in both craft and speech. Note that the first creation story in Genesis presents God as an orator creating reality while the second emphasizes his tangible manipulation of the world.

14 While Liuzza’s translation may seem only partially related to weaving, Raffel’s (1963) and Heaney’s (2000) translations interpret gewiofu closer to its meaning of “the weft of weaving.” Raffel’s translation reads “But God’s dread loom was woven with defeat for the monster,” (Beowulf, ca. 975-1025/1963, L. 696-697) while Heaney’s reads “the Lord was weaving a victory on his war-loom for the Weather-Geats.” (Beowulf, ca. 975-1025/2000, L. 696-697)

15 To further the argument, this is possibly a reason that the male friþuwebban in Anglo-Saxon literature is an angel; as a messenger from God, he would have similar creative abilities as well as carrying peace.
power in the mythic realm, illuminating overlooked manifestations of power in epic.

As a motif symbolizing birth, death, speech, and fate, weaving reflects the power dynamics of different ancient cultures. As a chore often associated with women and domesticity, usefulness of weaving highlights its importance. In many ways, weaving is the defining sign of civilization for communities. Indeed, civilizations require the same time and peace necessary for the creation of fabric, even when its function is purely decorative. Women harness the power of weaving in a variety of ways, reflecting their own voices (or lack thereof) in their art and making prophecies a reality. Helen, whose body instigates the Trojan War, finds her own place in the narrative by weaving the consequences of her actions and naming the warriors who will ravage Troy. Brynhild, a maiden of war and archetypal domestic woman, weaves the past as she foresees her doomed future. Wealhtheow, a bride exchanged for peace, takes the mantle and ensures the protection of her heroes as she imagines a brighter future for them. By reading their stories and understanding weaving as an extension of power in the same way that speaking or fighting enables control over a person’s destiny, scholars can better understand power outside a masculine, modern lens.
References


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