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Get Thee to a Nunnery: Unruly Women and Christianity in Medieval Europe

A thesis

presented to

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by

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ABSTRACT

Get Thee to a Nunnery: Unruly Women and Christianity in Medieval Europe

by

Sarah Elizabeth Wolfe

This thesis will argue that the *Beowulf* Manuscript, which includes the poem *Judith*, Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, and the Old-Norse-Icelandic *Laxdæla saga* highlight and examine the tension between the female pagan characters and their Christian authors. These texts also demonstrate that women's power waned in the shift between pre-Christian and Christian Europe.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will argue that the *Beowulf* manuscript, which includes the poem *Judith*, Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, and the Old-Norse-Icelandic *Laxdæla saga* highlight and examine the tension between the female pagan characters and their Christian authors. These texts demonstrate that women's power waned in the shift between pre-Christian and Christian Europe. I chose this particular time-period because the early medieval age to the middle of the tenth century was an important era to analyze and study. The female characters discussed in this thesis as well as one actual queen, are unusual because there are not many studies written about them.

The first chapter will explore the *Beowulf* manuscript, and I will use it as a backdrop for the other texts in this thesis. The women in *Beowulf* are thought-provoking and vibrant characters as they each embody a specific form of Queenship in the Anglo-Saxon period. I will use Leslie W. Rabine's essay "Love and the New Patriarchy: *Tristan and Isolde*" to demonstrate that the women in *Beowulf* are static as an overall structural form. Their power as women is completely different during this period than what Leslie Rabine examines in her essay with the figure of Isolde.

The second chapter will analyze the poem *Judith*, which is in the same manuscript as *Beowulf*. *Judith* demonstrates that Anglo-Saxon queens used the figure of the eponymous heroine as an example for a strong and active ruler. Even though Christian elements in *Beowulf* are tailored and uneven, Judith directly relies on God to aid her and save her people from the onslaught by the Assyrians. After she beheads Holofernes, Judith is given both earthly and heavenly glory for her reliance on God.

The third chapter examines Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* and the figure of the unruly Princess Alfhild. Alfhild changes from a meek and chaste young woman into a fierce pirate until she is married to her pursuer Prince Alf. After her marriage, Alfhild bears a daughter and is erased from the storyline as an unusual figure of a pirate and shield-maiden. Although she is erased in the text after she is married and bears a daughter, Alfhild is considered a remarkable female character by critics and readers.

By the thirteenth century, Christianity had become entrenched in England and Scandinavia, and I will again use Leslie W. Rabine's essay "Love and the New Patriarchy: *Tristan and Isolde*", to discuss how matriarchy and women's power was slowly dissolved by Christianity and patriarchal power sharpened in the courtly *Tristan and Isolde*. The use of her essay is used analogously to Beowulf and the Old-Norse-Icelandic *Laxdæla saga* to examine the power women in pre-and post Christian countries. This fourth chapter discusses the two powerful female characters in the *Laxdæla saga*: Unn the "deep-minded" and Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir. Both women are active and influential in the saga. Unn is a daring and wise widow, who, after the death of her husband and son in Scotland, makes her way to Iceland. She is a dominant landowner and uses her influence by securing good marriage partners for her relatives and grants her grandson the ownership of her property. After a long and vibrant life, she dies of old age and is buried as a pagan woman, which is in contrast at the end of the saga, when Gudrun was buried as a Christian woman. Gudrun can arguably be considered the main character of *Laxdæla saga* and was regarded as not just beautiful, but wise and generous as well. Her four marriages are her power, but when she is frequently a widow, her ascendancy is at its height. After the death of her fourth husband, Gudrun becomes famous for being a nun and then an anchoress.

Lastly, in the fifth chapter, I will examine an actual queen in comparison to the fictional royal women in this thesis such as the mythical Alfhild or *Beowulf's* Wealtheow. Her contemporaries viewed Queen Ælfthryth as both a devout Christian and a wicked woman since it was rumored that she ordered her step-son, King Edward “the Martyr”, to be killed so her own son, King Æthelred, could rule. Even though her reputation was tainted by this possibility of murder, Ælfthryth was a founder of nunneries and a strong ally of the tenth century Benedictine reforms. I chose this particular queen instead of other such notable women like Abbess Hild or Æthelflaed, daughter of King Alfred, because Ælfthryth was an interesting mixture of unruliness and piety.

Overall, each of these women, both fictional and real, pagan and Christian, are significant to this thesis and are used to highlight the tension between the (mostly) Christian authors of these various texts and their (mostly) pagan female characters.

Role of Women in Beowulf

Stacy S. Klein argues in her book *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, “All of the named female figures in *Beowulf* are queens. Royal women in the poem thus stand as representative of “woman,” and as figures around whom accrue anxieties, questions, and issues regarding sexual difference” (91). Although there is a small number of female characters in *Beowulf*, which includes Beowulf’s unnamed mother and Grendel’s Mother, I will briefly examine not just Wealtheow and Modthryth, but Freawaru, Wealtheow’s daughter, Hildburgh, and Hygd, Beowulf’s Aunt.

In Anglo-Saxon culture, women were lauded by being “peace-weavers”. Peace-weaving can be seen as an active function during the Anglo-Saxon period spread by women through their

families to keep the peace and maintain order. Peace-weaving can be described as the actions of a woman who represents peace, designed to soothe the thorny relations between warring groups through arranged marriages. Klein remarks about the figure of Wealhtheow, who is considered a good example in *Beowulf* for being a successful peace-weaver, “her designation as *friðusibb folca*, “peace-pledge of the people” (2017a), suggests her potential success as a peace-pledge between the Danes and another kingdom” (103). This statement reinforces a positive outlook on Hrothgar’s queen, in contrast to some critics who believe that Wealhtheow is a passive, ineffectual woman. Helen Damico argues in her book, *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* that the *Beowulf* poet used particular poetic concepts to demonstrate that Wealhtheow was an important personage in the poem. Damico states: “This is not to deny Wealhtheow’s subordinate standing in the poem’s hierarchy of characters; yet subordination does not necessarily imply insignificance” (14). Wealhtheow’s importance is evident in how she is a peace-weaver for her tribe, a good queen to her husband’s court, and a wise woman.

As well as being peace-weavers for their kin or communities, women were viewed in Anglo-Saxon society as wise. As Klein states: “femaleness was an attribute that was thought to be accompanied by mental powers and the ability to provide sound advice, particularly in matters requiring foresight” (91). Wealhtheow is considered wise, as she speaks to Beowulf with “measured words” (43). Wisdom is a valuable attribute in a woman, especially a queen, who was meant to dispense helpful advice to her husband.

Aristocratic Wealhtheow Anglo-Saxon women are also meant to be a good hostess and a generous giver of gifts. Wealhtheow is often seen going among the thanes of Hrothgar’s court distributing the mead to them, and being visible and active as a queen. The poet remarks: “Wealhtheow came in, Hrothgar’s queen, / observing the courtesies. Adorned in her gold, she

graciously saluted the men in hall, / then handed the cup first to Hrothgar” (612-616). She also gives Beowulf, in gratitude for ridding Heorot of the foul monster Grendel: “a wealth of wrought gold graciously bestowed: two arm bangles, / a mail-shirt and rings, / and the most resplendent / torque of gold” (1192-95). She is open-handed with the gold items given to Beowulf and not miserly at all. Wealtheow is a positive example of a woman being a gracious hostess to her husband’s court, generous as a gift-giver, and esteemed as a wise woman.

Nevertheless, the intriguing but problematical figure of Modthryth, or Thryth as her name is sometimes read, is the opposite of the serene and powerful Wealhtheow. Modthryth uses her power in a completely different manner than Wealhtheow does. Modthryth topples what normal Anglo-Saxon queens perform in Anglo-Saxon society, as she is comparable to the Old-Norse pagan Valkyrie figure when she orders her presumptuous thanes to be put to death for gazing at her in the wrong manner. The Valkyries are the Norse god Odin’s handmaidens who chose favored slain warriors for Valhalla, a place of continual warfare, feasting, and drinking. While Modthryth does not speak at all in *Beowulf*, her actions indicate her power. It is only when Offa marries Modthryth that her disruptive power changes to a benevolent force.

Critics often view Modthryth and Hygd as opposite figures. Hygd, wife of King Hygelac, is a wise, generous, and kind woman. Although young, Hygd resembles Wealhtheow as the narrator states: “her mind was thoughtful” (1928).

Freawaru, Wealhtheow’s daughter, is also a peace-weaver and like her mother, goes to the warriors of the court and hands out the mead. This signifies that Freawaru is following her mother’s example as well as being active in Hrothgar’s court. Beowulf remarks that although Freawaru is a fitting bride to end a feud between her father and Ingeld, which echoes back to

Wealhtheow's purpose to end strife between her tribe and Hrothgar's, Freawaru may not manage to do the same. The hero comments: "But generally the spear / is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, / no matter how admirable the bride may be" (2029-31). Her situation is comparable to the figure of Hildeburh, who had lost her husband, brother, and son in a deadly feud. However, although critics like Jane Chance argue that young women like Freawaru or Hildeburh are "failed" peaceweavers, Hildeburh's actions convey the opposite of passivity and weakness. The poet states: "Then Hildeburh / ordered her own/ son's body / be burnt with Hnaef's, / the flesh of his bones / to sputter and blaze/ beside his uncle's" (1110-1116). Since Hildeburh is Danish, as was her brother, her gesture of placing her Frisian son beside him to be burned argues for a type of unifying gesture to tie the two tribes together in death, since they were not unified in life.

The *Beowulf* women are active, wise, and generous gift-givers which binds the entire court to be loyal and faithful to the royal family. In Rabine's article, Isolde is a completely different woman from such varied characters in *Beowulf*, such as Wealhtheow, Modthryth, or Hygd. The courtly love motif is interlaced in the *Tristan and Isolde* tale as Rabine states: "courtly literature, through its treatment of women, helps to produce forms of logic that create and isolate an ideal markedly separate from reality" (43). Irish Isolde comes from a background that has strong, powerful woman, but her situation and personality changes when she is married to Mark, King of Cornwall. Rabine argues: "Yet the text retains strong traces of a dissident feminine voice which conflicts with the final narrative and ideological structures" (43). In Cornwall or nearly in any medieval society, women are constrained and closely guarded: "They seclude women to ensure their sexual purity, isolate them from the clan relations that give them independence from their husbands, and place them under the control of one man, and a stranger

at that” (55). Instead of Isolde choosing her own husband, as they do in Ireland, Tristan tricks her into marrying his Uncle, King Mark, a man whom she has never met. This idea is compounded when Isolde is married to Mark and lives in Cornwall, as Rabine asserts: “her lack of legal and also physical freedom, the constant portrayal of her as hemmed in, trapped, spied upon, pushed into a corner, able to escape only by the most desperate of measures” (62). This stark portrayal of a female character in a twelfth century text is in strong contrast with most of the women in *Beowulf*. Isolde in Cornwall completely changes her life to conform to her new role as wife to King Mark and her relationship with Tristan, as Rabine contends: “It is she whose life becomes totally identified with love because there is nothing else for her. Her only escape from her enslavement is through romantic love. . . . For Tristan and Isolde, who must remain physically separated, the ideal can be practiced only in death” (72). Courtly love, as in *Tristan and Isolde*, is entirely at variance with the Anglo-Saxon ideals of *Beowulf*.

Each of these women in *Beowulf* are vital elements to the narrative as differing viewpoints of the concept of Queenship. The scribe’s use of not just the figures of Wealhtheow and Modthryth, but the other women in *Beowulf* depict them as significant and dynamic additions to the overall masculine tone of the poem.

However, the women in *Beowulf* have been viewed in multitudinous ways by various scholars, which causes readers to be confronted with multiple, and oftentimes, confusing perspectives about them. Jane Chance argues in her book *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* that the women in *Beowulf* are weak and tragic. She states: “Unfortunately, women who fulfill this ideal role in Anglo-Saxon literature are usually depicted as doomed and tragic figures, frequently seen as weeping or suffering” (10), yet Alexandra Hennessy Olsen asserts that Chance views, “Wealhtheow, Frewaru . . . as failed peaceweavers” (316; 1986, 106). Olsen

believes differently as she comments: “Women are not excluded from the world of *Beowulf*. They play important roles that are public and active rather than merely private and passive” (314). The women in *Beowulf* have been considered ineffectual though important by Chance to a more positive outlook from Helen Damico in her profound study of Wealhtheow. Gillian R. Overing has written that: “There is no place for women in the masculine economy of *Beowulf*; they have no space to occupy, to claim, to speak from” (222), yet ironically, she also states that most of the women are powerful figures and comments in her other book that discusses *Beowulf*, *Language, sign and gender in Beowulf*, that they: “have a role to play in the poem” (73).

Overall, these women are important and significant characters. In these texts, each of the authors, other than the anonymous scribe of *Beowulf*, were monks or members of the clergy, so their viewpoints color their material, oftentimes comparing the women from the legendary timeframes to the women of their contemporary times. They criticize the fictional women, especially those who are of an unruly and nonconforming disposition until the woman is “tamed” by societal pressures. Nevertheless, after these women are “tamed”, erased by marriage and childbirth, or change to become Christians, they are still vital to the narrative.

The author of the *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes), was a Danish monk called Saxo Grammaticus. He wrote his chronicles in the thirteenth century when Christianity was the main religion of Scandinavia, which pervades his works. Saxo discusses the unruly Princess Alfild, who slays men when she becomes a pirate, but her wayward behavior becomes checked after she is married and bears a daughter.

In the Old Norse *Laxdæla saga*, Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir, a renowned woman, is another powerful and unusual woman in this essay. *Laxdæla saga* discusses the divide between

paganism and Christianity. Gudrun is the main female character in the *Laxdæla saga*, and besides being famed for her beauty and love of fine apparel, she is well known for her wisdom: “She was the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous as well” (327). Even though Modthryth and Alfild are intriguing characters, Gudrun is the most vivid and well-rounded of the women discussed in this thesis.

The advent of Christianity as portrayed in *Laxdæla saga* brings change to Iceland, and influences Gudrun later on in the saga. Two missionaries sent by the King Olaf Tryggvason: “went to the Althing and urged men to convert to the new religion, both eloquently and at length, after which all the people of Iceland converted to Christianity” (354). Thereafter, according to the saga, Iceland is predominantly Christian, and the heathen practices are disappearing. This is an important change because Gudrun becomes a devout Christian later in the saga. After Iceland becomes Christianized, Gudrun becomes famous for being the first woman to be an anchoress and a nun.

Modthryth, Wealhtheow, Alfild, and Gudrun all come from similar Scandinavian backgrounds. All four characters emerge in the critical era where Christianity replaced paganism, and the authors are Christian who are looking back to a pagan, legendary timeframe. Modthryth is a queen set even in a further past in *Beowulf* who is aggressive toward her thanes, yet is “tamed” by the great Offa to become a compassionate and generous queen. Alfild turns from a chaste, mild princess to a fierce pirate, while Gudrun is a woman who has a strong, controlling personality that eventually softens when she becomes a devout Christian.

Unlike Wealhtheow, who is portrayed as an active and benevolent queen, Modthryth is considered an aberrant figure amongst the queens that populate *Beowulf*. Modthryth does not

hand out the mead to her warriors, or give generously. Modthryth does not practice anything that other queens such as Wealhtheow or Hygd do, yet she becomes wise and a good leader.

Helen Damico's study, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, is predominantly about Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen. Damico does discuss Modthryth and calls her: "the homicidal queen of Offa" (28) and emphasizing that her violent behavior: "allies her with the valkyrie-figures" (28). In commenting that "the poet records her conversion from evil to virtuous queen after her marriage to Offa" (49), Damico overlooks that Modthryth might be an unusual figure rather than a wholly evil queen (49).

Jenny Jochens's examination of Norse women in *Women in Old Norse Society* discusses the discomfort of Christian writers contrasted with their pagan ancestors. Jochens explains: "They found it impossible to dissimulate the objectionable behavior of their own contemporaries, but they could eliminate most references to the peccadillos of their distant ancestors, thereby idealizing the past and accommodating the pagan world to their dreams for the future" (48). Even though misogyny became markedly more frequent throughout Scandinavia when Christianity, especially demonstrated by the Christian clergy, spread, Jochens adds: "it is nonetheless true that Christianity introduced radical changes into women's lives. The new religion's most original contribution to the feminine condition was the insertion of gender equality into marriage and sexual relations" (167). Jochens's book is the most persuasive analysis of how Norse women's lives changed from pre-Christian to Christian times.

Judith Jesch wrote an overview of Scandinavian women in her book *Women in the Viking Age*. She briefly discusses Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir and *Laxdæla saga* as she argues: "Of all the sagas of Icelanders, it has the broadest range of female characters" (193) and: "it is *Laxdæla saga* which gives most prominence to women and their role in shaping events" (195). Jesch also

focuses on Saxo Grammaticus and his *Gesta Danorum*. She references famed maiden-warriors, such as Alfhild, and the erasure of their independence and individuality after they are married, as she states: “the female warrior as an aberration of the pagan period, to be tamed and turned into a ‘real woman’” (207). “Real women”, Saxo argues, are mothers and wives, not pagan, virginal, shield-maidens.

Even though Alexandra Hennessey Olsen has mixed views of the women in *Beowulf*, she argues for a positive outlook rather than views them as insignificant or passive figures. She states: “Critics of *Beowulf* have tended to minimize the importance of women in the poem because of the obvious importance of male heroism” (313), yet adds of the women that: “they play important roles that are public and active rather than merely private and passive” (314). This declaration is definitely applicable to both Wealhtheow and Modthryth, although they use their power as queens in decidedly different ways.

Gillian R. Overing interprets the women of *Beowulf* differently than Olsen, as she uses more theoretical approaches to analyze her subjects, using examples from Kristeva, Freud, and Cixous. She further explains: “my broader aim will be to suggest a context for interpretation of the poem in which the operation of desire—that of the characters within the narrative and that of the critics without—may be acknowledged and revalued” (219). Olsen is similar to Chance, who believes that the women dwell in the periphery of the poem. Olsen states: “the women in *Beowulf*, whether illegitimate monsters or pedigreed peaceweaving queens, are all marginal excluded figures” (225), yet states a couple of pages before that most of the women have given names and are queens, which gives them, as she argues: “some titular power of rule” (223). Her arguments are inconsistent, but still important to the study of the significant and thought-provoking women in *Beowulf*.

Overall, each of these works on Old Norse, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon studies enriches and furthers the discussion of the changes of women's lives during the Christianization of Iceland, Denmark, and Anglo-Saxon England. It can be contended that after the Christianization of these countries that women, especially if women were considered "unruly", were critiqued by the clergy.

The *Beowulf* Manuscript

Introduction

The epic of *Beowulf* was copied before the year 1000 C.E. by an anonymous scribe, who was most likely a monk. The narrative is of Scandinavian origin. *Beowulf* survives in a single manuscript, Cotton MS Vitellius A.XV in the British Library in London.

This chapter focuses on the social role of women. Although the scribe who copied *Beowulf* was probably a monk and helped transmit Christian themes into the text, the characters do not necessarily practice Christian ideals but noble pagan ones. Despite that R.D Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles argue in Klaeber's *Beowulf* that some of the characters within the poem "resemble the patriarchs of Old Testament history in that they may be virtuous in their conduct, or heroic in their deeds or philosophical in their thinking, without ever having the benefit of instruction in Christian doctrine," this is particularly true in the case of many of the queens included in *Beowulf* (Ixix). A comparison of queens and kings in this text demonstrates that, while women might be aware of God, this is never explicit in the text. Instead, Beowulf, Hrothgar, and many others are, at the most, monotheistic. As Edward B. Irving Jr, contends: "I concluded that the kind of Christianity that Beowulf displays is distinctly limited: not so much primitive (though critics may once have seen it as the Christianity of those recently or barely converted) as either deliberately or unconsciously tailored to the dimensions of heroic poetry"

(186). Even though the Christianity in *Beowulf* is uneven and tailored to the poem, the women seem to be written unequally in regards to religious matters. Geoffrey Hindley emphasizes this particular statement in his book *A Brief History of the Anglo-Saxons*: “Set in legendary pagan times, the poem is nevertheless shot through with Christian sentiment and imagery” (25) as well as adding: “Pagan and Christian mesh at the most basic levels” (25). Arguably, Christianity and paganism intertwine with each other in the poem. The Christian element in *Beowulf* is uneven, and the women, such as Wealhtheow or Modthryth are depicted with unequal amount of textual detail.

Wealhtheow

As Klein states, queens were very important figures in Anglo-Saxon works: “Across a spectrum of Anglo-Saxon texts, royal women stand out as the dominant female figures; their presence is felt with far greater force than that of any other group of women” (191). In *Beowulf*, Queen Wealhtheow, wife of King Hrothgar, is one of the most significant female characters, yet is problematic because of the lack of a religious identity in the text. Although Jochens is talking about Scandinavian women, the lack of a religious identity or function in *Beowulf* for the female characters can also be applied. She states: “this female element was eliminated from northern religion, and its decline was paralleled by a similar but delayed deterioration of women’s religious and ritual functions” (164). Instead of there being a possible reference to religion or Christianity in *Beowulf*, the women are not mentioned undertaking any of these particular functions.

Wealhtheow, though she is generous to her thanes, is not revealed as being benevolent or compassionate to the poor. She concerns herself with the thanes of her husband’s court as she dispenses gifts and hands out the mead to them. She deals with secular matters, not religious or

charitable ones as Klein argues that: “By passing the cup first to her husband, and subsequently offering drinks to the rest of the men, the queen reiterated social hierarchies within the hall” (115). Wealhtheow is fulfilling an important and active role in her husband’s court, highlighting that her position is not weak. Theresa Earenfight contends in her book *Queenship in Medieval Europe*: “the figure of the queen in literature . . . served to convey and model cultural ideals of women and power” (65). She also comments that: “Literary and visual sources are creative works of imagination that describe an idealized archetypal image of queens that reflects truths about queens and queenship” (65-66). The figure of Wealhtheow powerfully illustrates this statement. She is considered wise, a gracious hostess in her husband’s court, and a generous dispenser of gifts as Earenfight adds: “hospitality and gift exchange were vitally important aspects of a queen’s duty that derived from her role as mistress of the household” (39). Wealhtheow’s generous gift-giving is significant in showing off how wealthy and liberal her husband’s court is at Heorot.

Wealhtheow’s secularity is obvious as she is a concerned mother taking an interest in her two sons. She graciously but firmly reminds her husband Hrothgar that he has two sons of his own to rule after him. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen argues that: “Three roles that have traditionally been identified are those of *hostess* . . . *peaceweaver* . . . and *ritual mourner*. Two others that have been discussed only recently are *goader* and *counselor*” (314), yet she does not discuss any sort of religious identity that the women might fulfill in the poem. None of the critics that I have studied have discussed or made mention why there is a lack of religious or Christian knowledge by the women of *Beowulf*.

Even though both Wealhtheow and Hrothgar are grateful and relieved that Beowulf has: “purged the hall” (825), chiefly Hrothgar and Beowulf, praise God. Wealhtheow only once

praises God, and the narrator has chosen to report this, not as a direct quote, like Hrothgar or Beowulf's words, but indirectly. Seamus Heaney's version states that Wealhtheow: "thanked God for granting her wish / that a deliverer she could believe in would arrive / to ease their afflictions" (626-28). The rest of the time, the men of the poem worship God or are aware of him. Even though Wealhtheow praises God once, this one time in comparison to the numerous times it is mentioned that Hrothgar or Beowulf gives praise, this still highlights Wealhtheow or any of the other queens lack of a Christian or religious background. Hrothgar praises God for Beowulf and how he saved Heorot, but the poet does not even give Wealhtheow any similar aspects of adoration and thanks to God. King Hrothgar states: "First and foremost, let the Almighty Father be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long harrowing by Grendel" (927-8). Debatably, Hrothgar and Wealhtheow are in unequal positions in accordance to religious beliefs.

Although Wealhtheow is active and powerful in her husband's court, as Helen Damico states: "Commentators. . . fail to investigate fully the significance of other functions the poet has designated for her—those of 'bedfellow', mother, and political influence in the court" (5), Wealhtheow is silent on religious matters. Even though Wealhtheow is a good queen to her people, it is quite perplexing that the poet does not mention or suggest that she is involved in religious duties, even pagan ones. Such religiosity for women is passed over and only focused on the men's belief. In David Pett's book, *Pagan and Christian: Religious Change in Early Medieval Europe*, he analyzes paganism versus Christianity in terms of archeology. Yet he also adds: "Women clearly had a tradition of having considerable agency within the religious and ritual realm within the pagan Anglo-Saxon world, and it is not impossible that they continued to exercise this autonomy with reference to the process of conversion (108). This argues that even

though fictional queens such as Wealhtheow or Modthryth are not aware of Christianity, physical women, whether they are queens or not, are still considered agents of the Christian faith.

Modthryth

Modthryth does not act in a Christian or even womanly manner at all, according to Anglo-Saxon ideas of womanliness, because of her fierce and aberrant personality. Klein comments: “*Beowulf*. . .exhibits a profound lack of tolerance for female militancy and women’s transgression of normative gender roles” (108). Modthryth does not display any queenly approved customs such as handing out the mead to her warriors or giving them treasure, like Wealhtheow . Instead, the *Beowulf* poet comments: “Great Queen Modthryth / perpetrated terrible wrongs” (1932-33). The violent and wicked Modthryth puts her thanes to death if they look at her without her permission, causing the poet to remark that: “Even a queen outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that. A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent / with loss of life for imagined insults” (1940-43). Although the poet believes that Modthryth is retaliating against her thanes needlessly, arguably she saw them as a threat to her own person and thought it necessary that they deserved to die.

Modthryth’s belligerence toward her court can be exemplified as a link to the Old-Norse pagan Valkyrie figure as Klein states: “a battle-maid created by the fusion of either a baleful war-spirit of men’s destruction, or a benevolent war-guardian and protector of heroes” (106). Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir agrees that Modthryth has links to the Old Norse literary trope of the maiden-king as she adds: “*Beowulf*’s Mōðpryðo/ Fremu is a good example” (231). Carolyne Larrington further explains in her book *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe*: “the arrogant queen typically scorns and tortures her suitors before she is humbled, often brutally, and agrees to make a match with the saga’s hero” (Larrington 159, Kalinke 1990).

Modthryth is an independent and strong-willed woman whom the poet disagrees with, believing it is not right for a woman to be proud and use her power for malevolent purposes. Modthryth wields her power through her willingness to kill her thanes for gazing at her in the wrong manner: “If any retainer ever made bold / to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord’s / stared at her directly during daylight, the outcome was sealed” (1935-37). Mary Dockray-Miller adds in her article *The Masculine Queen in Beowulf*, “Modþryðo, though female, is ultimately masculine since she wields her power the same way Beowulf does” (31). Even though I believe that Modthryth gave the order to kill her thanes, Dockray-Miller believes that, like Beowulf, Modthryth killed the thanes with her own hands: “we can now read the passage as a story of a queen who bound and decapitated with her own hands those men who offended her” (35). Either way, Modthryth was a powerful woman whose bloodthirsty actions, according to the poet, had to end.

Once Modthryth married the great hero Offa, her power changes into a benevolent force when she stops killing her thanes and instead uses that authority as a source to further good works in her husband Offa’s court. Modthryth was considered a better queen to her husband than to her own thanes as the poet declares: “she was less of a bane to people’s lives / less cruel-minded, / after she was married / to the brave Offa” (1946-1948).

The poet’s ambivalence and disapproval of Modthryth’s actions changes, and she is more like Wealhtheow. Although Dockray-Miller states that while most critics see Modthryth’s change as a reformation of character, she argues differently: “Close examination of the description of her life at Offa’s court shows her unconventionality in a continued “rebellion” against the binary oppositions that defined her as a virago and now as passive peace weaver” (36). Modthryth, because of her cruel ways, is an aberration compared to the other queens in

Beowulf, yet she is an interesting woman who changes to be a better queen when she is married to King Offa.

Even though, like Wealhtheow or any of the other female characters, there is no discussion about the religion of Modthryth, yet the poem does say that she would: “grow famous for her good deeds and conduct of life” (1952-3). It can be supposed that since the poet is looking backwards to an even further past from *Beowulf* that Modthryth is pagan, though this suggestion cannot be truly confirmed.

Judith

The manuscript Cotton MS Vitellius A.XV contains both *Judith* and *Beowulf*. Even though she is not royal, Judith is a powerful and wise woman much in the mold of the queens in *Beowulf*. Amalie Föbel argues in her essay *The Political Traditions of Female Rulership in Medieval Europe*: “The Old Testament widow Judith functioned as the type of a clever and brave woman because, with personal imitative, feminine subtlety, and great determination, she seduced and beheaded Holofernes, who was threatening her city, thus demonstrating greater courage than the men of her city” (71). Judith, through the help of the Lord, kills Holofernes and becomes renowned for the saving of her people. Since the beginning of *Judith* is cut off, the action takes place in the camp of the Assyrian General Holofernes: “That was the fourth day / after Judith, / prudent in mind, this woman of elfin beauty first visited him” (12-14). Even though Judith is a widow, she is given many appellations by the poet such as “blessed maiden” (35), “wise Judith” (40), and “holy maiden” (56). These designations highlight what a significant and acclaimed woman Judith is in comparison to Holofernes’s evil character. Judith is a very beautiful woman and Holofernes desires to have her: “he intended to violate / the bright woman with defilement and with sin” (58-59). However, Judith is protected by God as the narrator notes: “The Judge of

glory, the majestic Guardian, the Lord, . . . would not consent to that, but he prevented him from that thing” (60-61). Judith is protected from being dishonored by Holofernes, yet since they are alone in his bed, she plans to kill him to save her people from destruction. Tracey-Anne Cooper argues that Judith is an amalgam of an allegorical figure and a spiritual exemplar: “she is presented as an allegorical type in a contest between good and evil” (170) and adds that the Anglo-Saxons used: “her narrative both as tropological message and allegorical type” (170). To some extent, I disagree with Cooper’s analysis, because this type of argument diminishes Judith as a powerful and active character. Her allegorical links are a part of Judith’s character, but not all of it.

In regard to both Judith’s wisdom and her use as an instrument of the Lord, it is noted in the poem, “Then the Saviour’s glorious handmaid was very mindful of how she could deprive the terrible one of life most easily, before the impure and foul one awoke” (74-77). Klein states that Judith is a: “*miles Christi*” (106) or a female warrior-saint: “exemplified by such figures as . . . Judith. . . the *miles Christi* marshals spiritual weapons of mental, emotional and verbal fortitude” (106). She calls on God through prayer to help her: “I want to beseech you for your mercy on me in my time of need, glorious trinity.” (85-87). God then answers her fervent plea for help: “Then the highest Judge / inspired her immediately with great zeal, / as he does to each of the dwellers on earth who seek help from him / with reason and with true faith” (94-7).

She is filled with peace and a renewed sense of both spiritual and mental vigor: “Then she felt relief in her mind, / hope was renewed for the holy woman” (97-8). Judith then become a divine instrument for God’s justice as she arranges to kill Holofernes: “She seized the heathen man / securely by his hair, / pulled him shamefully towards her / with her hands, and skillfully placed / the wicked and loathsome man / so that she could most easily manage the miserable one well”

(98-101). The text implies that Judith struggles with pinning Holofernes down so she can kill him more easily. After she gets Holofernes in a better position to kill, the anticipation is intense: “Then, the woman with braided locks struck / the enemy, that hostile one, / with the shining sword, so that she cut through half of his neck” (103-106). This line is a powerful statement of Judith’s bravery and strength as she then cuts through Holofernes’s neck: “The courageous woman / struck the heathen hound energetically / another time so that his head rolled / forwards on the floor” (108-111). The wicked and lascivious Holofernes is stopped by the bravery and faith of the widow Judith and she gains for herself both earthly and eternal honor by her astounding act: “Judith had won illustrious glory / in the battle as God, the Lord of Heaven, / granted it so when he gave her the victory” (122-24). Judith and her maidservant, both whom the narrator calls: “courageous” (132) and “triumphant” (134), slip out of the Assyrian camp with Holofernes’s head and depart to their home of Bethulia. Judith then victoriously calls on the people to listen to her as she both comforts them and tells them her brave deeds, “I am able to tell you a memorable thing so that you need no longer mourn in your minds” (151-2). What she has done is truly memorable and awe-inspiring as she tells the ecstatic people, “I deprived him of life / through God’s help” (185-6). Judith then tells the soldiers to go to battle, since she has killed the Assyrian General Holofernes: “Now I intend to ask / each of the men of these citizens, / each of the warriors, that you immediately hasten to battle” (186-89). The Israelites defeated the Assyrians: “The guardians of the country / had gloriously conquered their foes, / the ancient enemy, / on that battlefield” (318-21). After the Israelites plundered the Assyrians of their fine possessions, and in order to show their gratitude to Judith: “The brave warriors / brought as her reward from that expedition / the sword of Holofernes and his gory helmet, / and likewise his ample mail-coat” (334-37) and the rest of Holofernes’s extensive treasure and ornaments. This

scene highlights, as Malcom Goddon remarks in his article *Biblical literature: the Old Testament*: “Her military status is emphasized by the fact that her prize at the end of the battle is not the bedcoverings and pots and pans of Holofernes as in the biblical version, but his war-equipment” (229). The Israelites are grateful to Judith for saving them from their powerful enemy, yet Judith gives honor to God for everything that has happened to her: “For all of this Judith said thanks to the Lord of Hosts, / who had given her honour / and glory in the kingdom of this earth, and also as her reward in heaven” (341-343). For her faith in God, Judith is rewarded both in her earthly life and her heavenly one: “because she possessed true faith” (344). Because of Judith’s deep and sincere faith in God, she was able to overcome the lecherous and cruel Assyrian Holofernes, thereby saving her people. The poem *Judith* ends with the affirmation that Judith is granted a place in Heaven because of her strong and sincere faith in God: “Indeed, at the end she did not doubt / in the reward which she had long yearned for” (345-46). Judith is lauded with praise for her remarkable act in killing Holofernes and her profound faith in God.

Conclusion

The women in *Beowulf* are background for the other texts in this thesis, including the poem *Judith*. Each of the women in *Beowulf* demonstrate a particular facet of Queenship, from Wealhtheow’s generosity and famed wisdom in her husband’s court to the scandalous figure of Modthryth, whose aberrant personality changes when she is married to the great hero Offa.

In *Judith*, the eponymous heroine relies on God to aid her in killing Holofernes as she directly calls on the “glorious trinity” (84) and to protect the people of Bethulia from the Assyrians. For Anglo-Saxon queens, Judith was an excellent exemplar, as Föbel argues: “Judith [and Esther] in particular were associated with displays of masculine strength. They became examples for queens because they used power in a typically masculine way for the good of their

people and were rewarded for it” (72). Like the female characters in *Beowulf*, Judith demonstrates that Anglo-Saxon queens could be active and powerful women who were strong leaders. In this stage of the fragility of Queenship, royal women made Judith their exemplar as a figure of leadership, and their rule was powerful and praised by their society.

CHAPTER 2

ALFHILD

According to Carolyne Larrington: “The first nine books of the *Gesta Danorum* depict the powerful and active women of the heathen past, usually critically” (175). However, it can be argued that Saxo was filled with both wonder and disapproval at these autonomous and shrewd women. This is illustrated in the way Alfhild protects her chastity from men by covering herself completely and using a snake and a viper to safeguard herself. Saxo adds: “When fear was applied to young men’s forwardness it checked their heated fancies” (210). The animals curbed Alfhild’s zealous suitors and kept her from harm.

Inge Skovgaard-Petersen and Nanna Damsholt discuss in their essay *Queenship in Medieval Denmark* that: “Saxo’s narrative is a moral lesson based on clerical views. . . . he put Christian ideas which in his view stemmed from natural law, into the legendary past to create a Utopia” (27). Princess Alfhild was a fiercely chaste young woman: “who almost from her cradle displayed such true modesty that she had her face perpetually veiled by her robe to prevent her fine looks arousing anyone’s passions” (210). However, unlike Modthryth, who orders her presumptuous thanes killed because they gaze at her in the wrong manner, Alfhild’s father is the one who orders her suitors to be killed: “he should at once be decapitated and have his head impaled on a stake” (210), if they fail to pass the test to gain Alfhild in marriage.

It can also be added that Modthryth is proud of her beauty because it is a dangerous lure to men. While Alfhild seems ashamed of her own beauty, and this could be due to the influence of both her cautious parents. However, Alf, the son of King Sigar and a determined suitor, is resolved to win Alfhild in marriage: “he soon approached the confining doors where, grasping a

bar of red-hot steel in a pair of tongs, he thrust it down the viper's gaping throat and laid it lifeless on the floor. Next, as the other snake swept forward. . .he destroyed it by hurling his spear straight between its open fangs" (210-211). Oddly enough, after Alfhild has praised: "her wooer's excellence" (211), her mother rebukes her: "saying she had lost all sense of shame and been won by baited looks; she had not formed any proper judgement of his virtue, but, gazing with an unprincipled mind, had been tickled by his enticing appearance" (211). Her mother's sharp words cause Alfhild to turn against Alf: "she changed into man's clothing and from being a highly virtuous maiden began to lead the life of a savage pirate" (211). Alfhild is no longer docile and much to Saxo's dismay has become a female pirate. Alfhild's fierceness is very similar to Queen Modthryth in *Beowulf*. Saxo states with much surprise: "Many girls of the same persuasion had enrolled in her company" (211), and Alfhild becomes captain of a pirate band, thus highlighting that she is also very similar to one of Odin's Valkyries. Saxo adds that Alfhild: "performed feats beyond a woman's courage" (211). Even though Birgit Strand does not discuss the character of Alfhild in her essay *Women in Gesta Danorum*, she does argue that: "In spite of his low opinion of women in general, Saxo could not deny the presence of strong, resolute, and independently-acting women; such women existed in the tradition upon which he built, as well as in his own time. On the other hand, he could insert them into his history on his own conditions" (147). Saxo's Alfhild is a strong and independent woman who assumes a role as a pirate that is usually ascribed to men.

Alfhild's admirer unwaveringly follows her, finally catches up with her, and fights against her crew: "young Alf leapt on to Alvild's prow and forced his way up to the stern, slaughtering all who resisted him" (211). Alf is more than pleased that he has caught up with Alfhild: "Alf was overjoyed when, beyond all expectation, he had presented to him the girl he

had sought indefatigably over land and sea despite so many perilous obstacles” (212). Like Modthryth, Alfhild is “tamed” by her husband, and she becomes a “normal” woman again as Alf: “compelled her to change back into feminine clothing” (212). She even bears him a daughter, Gurith (212), thereby demonstrating that Alfhild is no longer a feared female pirate, but fades from the narrative as a wife and mother, as Birgit Strand states: “the proper destiny of shield-maidens was marriage”(194). Even fierce shield-maidens have to get married and bear children, just like any other woman. Shield-maidens are women who went into battle, were chaste, and oftentimes were fiercer and more brutal than the men that they fought against. Women like Alfhild get their individuality as shield-maidens erased when they get married, since marriage and childbirth is the “proper destiny” for them.

Even though Carol Clover, regrettably, does not discuss Alfhild very much in her article *Maiden Warriors and Other Sons*, and focuses on other women warriors that are found in Old Norse sagas, yet Clover does reinforce Alfhild’s unusualness. She states: “The Saxonian digression on Amazons that heads this essay is prompted by the figure of Alfhild, who turns to make male dress and the military life to avoid marrying an unwanted suitor. There is no question of a surrogate son here, for Alfhild’s father is alive and she has two brothers” (41). Because Alfhild was an only daughter and all her male family members are alive, she still pursued a male lifestyle until Alf married her and she became a wife and mother.

Interestingly, Saxo has a digression on these fierce, valiant women, who as he says: “unsexed themselves” (212), to learn how to fight and become women warriors. He states: “As if they were forgetful of their true selves they put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm’s embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving” (212). These warrior women upset the

traditional role that women normally fulfilled and instead, like Alfhild, became fierce and powerful warriors like the legendary Valkyries of Scandinavian mythology.

William Layher argues in his essay, *Caught Between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse*, that Alfhild, as well as other women warriors, upset the normal social norms of medieval Scandinavia. Norse society viewed their actions with suspicion as he states: “the crossover figure of the maiden warrior disrupted the normal understanding of gender roles in Norse culture, in large part because they wore clothing or carried weapons or other items that “masked” their true identities as women” (185). This disruption of gender roles is explained by Saxo Grammaticus’s tone. He is both fascinated and repelled by these women who have resisted women’s social norms and embraced men’s roles in order to fight.

Judith Jesch argues, “As a Christian, a cleric, and a man, Saxo did not approve of women warriors, that much is clear. Like many a churchman, he saw only one possible role for women, that of a sexual being. To Saxo, therefore women warriors who refused this role are further examples of the chaos and disintegration of the old heathen Denmark, before the church and a stable monarchy brought in a new order” (178). Alfhild, like Modthryth, has to be controlled or tamed by marriage and childbirth in order to become a “normal” woman again. According to Saxo Grammaticus’s misogynistic treatment of women in his *Gesta Danorum*, the church and clergy were to bring stability and peace to their congregations. There is also censuring of the powerful and active women who incur the clergy’s disapproval, such as Saxo. Birgit and Peter Sawyer argue in their book *Medieval Scandinavia*: “As ecclesiastical influence grew, women were blamed for much that churchman disapproved of” (200) and like the proposal in this thesis that the concept of Queenship became fragile, Sawyer comments: “the diminished respect for women in Iceland is also evidenced by the bynames they were given. Before conversion these

were often complimentary...but afterward pejorative bynames began to be given, such as “mare of the farm (*garðafylja*) and “the noisy” (*ysja*) (Birgit Strand 200; Roberta Frank 1973, 483).

Women in pre-Christian times were, according to Sawyer, given respect and were important, however after the conversion, women’s status grew brittle, especially if a woman were viewed as wayward. Like Modthryth in *Beowulf*, Alfhild incurs Saxo’s disapproval as an unruly woman. As Strand argues, Alfhild is certainly a more intriguing figure than the Christian queens in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*:

the active women are generally to be found in the heathen part, i.e. the first nine books. Here we can find women who conjure and tell fortunes, make war and kill, plan or execute reprisals. . . . The colourless and shadowy women in the Christian part of *Gesta Danorum* present a striking contrast to the colourful women in the heathen section, where they sometimes even put men in the shade” (150-151).

Alfhild soon fades from the story after she is married to Alf and bears a daughter, as Margaret Clunies Ross argues in *The Cambridge Introduction to The Old Norse-Icelandic saga*: “It is generally agreed that representations of such women express a sex-role inversion that can be admired as long as it can ultimately be overturned, but is not socially acceptable in its active form” (121). Lisa M. Bitel furthermore highlights the anomaly that shield-maidens like Alfhild represent, as she adds: “Either way, they ended up miserable or died young, rendering a double lesson: first, fighting was properly gendered as male so that female fighters, though alluringly heroic, were barbarous; and, secondly, the barbarous past was over” (79). Shield-maidens were relegated to the barbarian past, distancing them from contemporary, “normal” women. Even though she is mentioned no more in the *Gesta Danorum* Alfhild leaves a strong impression on the reader’s imagination.

CHAPTER 3

UNN THE DEEP-MINDED AND GUDRUN ÓSVÍFSDÓTTIR

Unn is called an “exceptional woman” in Chapter Four of the *Laxdæla saga* (278) and demonstrates her ingenuity and cleverness when she builds a boat for herself and her followers to escape Scotland and go to Iceland after her son is killed: “She had a knorr built secretly in the forest. When it was finished, she made the ship ready and set out with substantial wealth” (278). Since she is a widow, she makes matches for her kin, which demonstrates her power as an influential woman. Unn expects to be treated as a woman of rank and nobility, which is revealed when she scorns one brother who does not treat her the way she believes she deserves because he did not come out to welcome her with a massive company: “Taking twenty men with her, Unn set off to seek her brother Helgi. He came to meet her as she approached and offered to put her up along with nine others. She answered him angrily, saying that she had hardly expected such stinginess of him, and departed” (279). However, her other brother Bjorn treats her differently: “When he learned of her coming, he went out to meet her with a large company, welcomed her warmly and invited her to stay with him along with all her companions” (279). This scene illustrates that she is imperious, quick-tempered, and proud.

After she grants portions of land to other men and her followers, Unn decides to leave everything else to her grandson, illustrating that she is generous and has a will of her own. Jochens adds: “Even if no longer physically attractive to men, Auðr/ Unnr, rich, powerful, and independent passed the last phase of her life in conformity with the masculine model available to mature men” (62). After her youthfulness fades and she is deprived of both her husband and son, Unn sets out to become an independent and wealthy woman on her own.

Unn's power is made evident when her grandson, Olaf, even states that he will follow her advice on getting married, and even more importantly promises her that his bride will not: "rob you of nether your property nor your authority." (281). As a result, Olaf then denies his future wife any control or influence during Unn's lifetime. During the time of the wedding preparations, it is revealed that Unn was growing testy in her old age: "Old age was tightening its grip on Unn. She was not up and about until noon and retired to bed early in the evening. She replied angrily if anyone asked after her health." (281). Pride and respectability are important in the Old Norse sagas as it is commented when Unn died: "Everyone was impressed at how well Unn had kept her dignity to her dying day" (282).

The saga also offers a fascinating glimpse of her burial: "On the final day Unn was borne to the burial mound which had been prepared for her. She was placed in a ship in the mound, along with a great deal of riches, and the mound closed" (282). This is a pagan burial, which is in strong contrast to Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir's funeral at the end of the saga. Pagan practices, such as the funeral of Unn, are slowly eradicated throughout Iceland, especially when King, later Saint Olaf comes into power. He then compels the Icelanders to accept the Christian faith, just as Norway did. Therefore, in the beginning of the saga, Unn dies a pagan death with pagan practices while the culture and religious practices at the end of the Saga have changed in Iceland. Churches are being built and when Gudrun dies as the first anchoress in Iceland, she is buried as a Christian, not as a pagan. Unn is buried as a well-respected and honored woman with great wealth in her burial ship while Gudrun, later on in the saga, is buried as a great Christian woman who ends her life as an anchoress and nun.

Arguably, the fascinating Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir is the main female character of the Old Norse-Icelandic *Laxdæla saga*, even though there are many other women significant women in

this saga. Gudrun, besides being famed for her beauty and love of fine apparel, is well-known for her wisdom: “She was the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous as well” (327). Her wisdom and good looks cause her to marry successively four times until in her old age she becomes a devout Christian after the death of her fourth husband. By using Leslie W. Rabine’s innovative study “Love and the New Patriarchy: *Tristan and Isolde*” to discuss pre-patriarchal society in the figure of Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir, I will discuss her individuality regarding her four colorful marriages, and Gudrun’s later choice to become a nun and an anchoress. Rabine’s essay is analogous to the figure of Unn and Gudrun in comparison to the tragic Isolde in *Tristan and Isolde*.

In the saga, Gudrun has four husbands. Her first husband, Thorvald, was given her hand in marriage without her consent, so she despised him and cunningly divorced him after she made his shirt too low, which was considered effeminate. Unlike Rabine’s *Tristan and Isolde*, Norse women had the power to divorce their husbands if they were dissatisfied with them. Marrying against Gudrun’s will could also have resulted in, as Rabine argues about Isolde’s unhappy marriage: “the destruction of a different kind of individuality” (38). Forced, unhappy marriages like Gudrun and Thorvald’s, and to a certain extent, her union with Bolli Thorleiksson, destroys the choice of free will in marriage. However, Gudrun’s autonomous choice is regained when she becomes a widow and has the power to choose a better, more likeable husband. Jochens reinforces this view as she states: “in many traditional cultures a woman gained wealth, influence, and prestige as she moved through the biological stages of life, often reaching her apogee as a widow” (63). Widows were powerful and independent women who could do as they pleased, such as Unn the “deep-minded”.

After Gudrun divorces Thorvald, she soon marries a man called Thord, who actually helped her divorce her first husband. Gudrun is very happy with her second husband, yet he drowns and she remains a widow until she is married to Bolli Thorleiksson, Kjartan's Olafsson's cousin and foster-brother. These two men who vie for Gudrun offer an arguably courtly love element to an Old-Norse saga and plunge the storyline into a tale of regret and the ensuing serious consequences for these characters, especially Gudrun. Ross highlights this debatably chivalrous element in the Old-Norse-Icelandic saga as she states: "Gudrun's role in this love triangle, with its echoes both of heroic poetry and of courtly romance, is far from superficial or perfunctory" (129). Since *Laxdæla saga* was written down in the thirteenth century, it is quite possible of the spreading of courtly love motifs became enmeshed in Old-Norse-Icelandic sagas. The enmeshing of courtly romance, such as in Rabine's discussion of that theme in her *Tristan and Isolde* essay, and the Christian as well as heroic elements in *Laxdæla saga* are not disparate. As well as the theme of courtly love in *Laxdæla saga*, Gudrun's love triangle can also be reinforced by its heroic elements of the famous Eddic tale of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, the Valkyrie Brynhildr, and the dragon-slayer Sigurðr. Heather O'Donoghue contends:

in fact, the central story in *Laxdæla saga*, a frustrated love affair between Guðrún and Kjartan, which ends with Guðrún marrying not Kjartan but his foster-brother Bolli, and finally exhorting her husband to kill Kjartan, itself closely follows the story told in this and related poems in the Edda, based on heroic legend, in which Sigurðr is murdered at the instigation of a tormented lover, Brynhildr, who has had to marry someone else. In other words, the saga author has turned to what is very likely to have been his own literary (or pre-literary) heritage to produce a scene which matches perfectly the naturalistic emotional currents of his narrative (59)

The echo of the heroic tale of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, the Valkyrie Brynhildr, and Sigurðr does seem to illustrate the *Laxdæla saga* the love triangle of Gudrun Ósvífsdóttir, Bolli Thorleiksson, and Kjartan Olafsson.

Although Gudrun and Kjartan seem to be a perfect match for each other, their wills clash and he soon leaves for Iceland, much to her displeasure. Gudrun waits fruitlessly for Kjartan to marry her, but his cousin Bolli convinces Gudrun to marry him instead, since she has received no word of encouragement from Kjartan. When Bolli goes to her father to ask for her hand in marriage, he replies: “Gudrun is a widow and as such she can answer for herself, but I will give my support” (355). This illustrates that Gudrun has power as a widow to choose to be married again, yet at the same time, her father implies that he can put pressure on her to marry Bolli. Just as she disliked her first husband, Gudrun does not care for Bolli. Soon, matters only intensify between Kjartan, Gudrun, and Bolli, leading up to the two men’s demise. Gudrun incites Bolli to attack Kjartan with the chilling words: “if you refuse to go along it will be the end of our life together” (369). After her urging, Bolli recalls past incidents, such as Kjartan thwarting him from buying some land that he wanted or scorning Bolli’s urge for reconciliation when he offers Kjartan a gift of some horses. Bolli seizes his weapons, and goes out to slay his foster-brother. Kjartan is soon exhausted from fighting and Bolli, after being goaded to end Kjartan’s life: “dealt him a death blow, then took up his body and held him in his arms when he died. Bolli regretted the deed immediately and declared himself the slayer” (372). While Gudrun is normally portrayed in a good light, this is one of the rare times that she reveals her true feelings, the narrator notes that she was satisfied that Kjartan was dead and makes the enigmatic comment to her husband: “A poor match they make, our morning’s work-I have spun twelve ells of yarn while you have killed Kjartan” (372). Bolli himself is killed in retaliation for Kjartan’s slaying.

Gudrun’s last husband is a nobleman called Thorkel Eyjolsson, who, although she loves him dearly, soon drowns. His death leads Gudrun into becoming a devout Christian as the narrator remarks: “Gudrun became

very religious” (418). Even though Gudrun is emphasized as: “the first Icelandic woman to learn the Psalter, and spent long periods in the church praying at night” (418), when Christianity is first mentioned in the saga, the main character who converts is not Gudrun, but Kjartan Olafsson, her admirer. The new King Olaf Tryggvason decides that Iceland should be compelled to accept Christianity, yet the Icelanders: “held counsel and agreed among themselves to refuse to adopt the new religion which the new king had decreed” (347). At last, Kjartan is persuaded to convert after he visits the King’s new church to listen to the Christian service. He muses to his cousin: “It seems to me that our welfare depends upon our believing this God whom the king supports to be the one God” (351).

Even though King Olaf wishes Kjartan to sail back to Iceland to convert the Icelanders, Kjartan refuses: “He did not wish to set himself up against his kinsmen” (352). At last, after King Olaf sends his own clerics to attempt to convert the populace, amid much tension, the narrator states that the two missionaries: “went to the Althing and urged men to convert to the new religion, both eloquently and at length, after which all the people of Iceland converted to Christianity” (354). Many critics have debated the historicity of the Old Norse sagas and especially of how easily the Icelanders chose to become Christian without any signs of conflict and as Rabine states of *Tristan and Isolde*, the same can be applied to *Laxdæla saga*: “it does not “realistically” represent social reality, nor does it consciously reflect history” (38-9). However, Birgit and Peter Sawyer also add: “knowledge of Christianity reached Iceland through many channels, from the British Isles as well as from an incompletely Christianized Norway” (104). Even though Iceland becomes a Christian nation, Christopher Abram adds in his essay *The Two ‘Modes of Religiosity’ in Conversion-Era Scandinavia*: “Iceland’s permissive attitude towards the clandestine worship of the old gods, the eating of horseflesh, and exposure of infants is the most famous, and probably untypical example of how a community could go through its ‘conversion moment’ yet retain sufficient elements from the old religion to make its identification as a Christian community problematic” (24). Nevertheless, this is an

important change in the religion of Iceland because Gudrun becomes a devout Christian later on in the saga and as well as famous for being the first woman in Iceland to be a nun and an anchoress.

During the time between her husband Bolli's death and her inveigling Thorgils, a possible suitor, Gudrun established a church on her land because she buried her father there. The narrator observes: "Osvif was buried at Helgafell, where Gudrun had a church built" (399). Birgit and Peter Sawyer argue that churches like Gudrun's, were: "founded by magnates and richer landowners either at the request of a bishop or on their own initiative to serve as their own family church, and at the same time as a mark of status" (110). Churches and Christianity become more intertwined with Gudrun as the saga progresses, yet this incident is passed over when it is mentioned that Gudrun is to marry the prominent Thorkel Eyjolsson as her fourth and final husband. After Thorkel's death, it is remarked that Gudrun turns devout: "Gudrun became very religious. She was the first Icelandic woman to learn the Psalter, and spent long periods in the church praying at night" (418). Thomas A. DuBois cites André Vauchez: "a worldly life could be partially redeemed through a retreat into a *vita angelica* late in life" (DuBois 275; André Vauchez 1993, 85-117). This could arguably be evidence that Gudrun was atoning for her acts in life that she later regretted, such as inciting her husband Bolli to kill his cousin and foster-brother Kjartan, whom Gudrun deeply loved, yet never married.

Christianity and paganism collide when Gudrun's granddaughter, Herdis, dreams that:

a woman approached her, she wore a woven cape and a folded head-dress, and her expression was far from kindly. She said to Herdis, 'Tell your grandmother that I care little for her company; she tosses and turns on top of me each night and pours over me tears so hot that I burn all over. I am telling you this because I prefer your company, although you have a strange air about you. All the same I could get along with you, if the distress caused me by Gudrun were not so great (418).

Herdis, of course, tells her grandmother her dream and the narrator adds: “Gudrun thought it was a revelation and the following morning she had the floorboards in the church removed at the spot where she was accustomed to kneel in prayer and the ground below dug up” (419). Remnants from Iceland’s pagan past are literally unearthed: “There they found bones, which were blackened and horrible, along with a chest pendant and a large magician’s staff” (419). Birgit and Peter Sawyer reinforce this scenario archeologically: “Excavation under the churches of Maere on Trondheim Fjord and at Frösö in Jämtland has uncovered evidence of pagan rituals” (105). In *Laxdæla saga*, Iceland’s pagan past has been crushed by a church and has to be removed from civilization and Christianity: “The bones were moved to a remote place little frequented by men” (419). The remote place where the bones are laid illustrate that they do not belong in Christian Iceland anymore and could signify a social consciousness that wishes to be distanced from this pagan discovery of the past.

Gudrun’s faith is mentioned even more insistently as she grows older: “Gudrun was now advanced in years and burdened with her grief, as was related earlier. She was the first woman to become a nun and anchoress” (420). Interestingly, as Jochens points out, becoming a religious woman such as an abbess, nun or anchoress was relatively rare in Iceland, which could indicate the seeming admiration for Gudrun’s choice later in life: “Nuns and abbesses were also less numerous than elsewhere in Europe. Iceland, for example numbering no more than seventy thousand inhabitants during the medieval period, contained only two nunneries. A few cases of Icelandic hermitesses, either attached to nunnery or living as anchorites in the wilderness, appear in the sources” (164).

Since Gudrun chose to become a nun first, a review of what they did during the medieval era would be useful. Nuns, as Silvia Evangelisti states in her book, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life*: “were devoted to a contemplative life of prayer, and bound by the three solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience” (15). It is interesting to note the shift of Gudrun from

becoming a nun to an anchoress. It seems as if Gudrun, though the saga does not give any information on the supposition, wanted a deeper, more satisfying spiritual relationship with God as an anchoress than as a nun. Mary Laven explains in her book *Virgins of Venice*, that the tedious regimen of the convent often caused nuns to protest at their way of life or even yearn to desire a stricter regimen to serve and worship God: “The monotony of the nuns’ daily observances-like the rules that governed their dress and diet-was intended to subordinate the individual to the common life” (18). Gudrun can be her individual self as an anchoress while becoming closer to God even though she would be under the authority of a bishop or a religious counselor. Larrington adds that the calling to be an anchoress could be seen as: “a form of advanced monasticism” (Larrington 120; Warren 1984: 197). Frances and Joseph Gies explain in their book *Women in the Middle Ages*: “the anchoresses were consigned to their cells with the saying of a mass usually. . .that of the Dead; holy water was sprinkled in the cell, the recluse prostrated herself on a bier, earth was scattered over her, and the officiating priest left the cell with the instructions, “Let them block up the entrance to the house” (92). They add that: “The recluses’ time was spent in prayer, and sometimes in work such as embroidery; often they were consulted as wise women and spiritual advisers” (92). Liz Herbert McAvoy states in her book, *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*: “anchoritism developed into an elite vocation which was popular amongst both men and women” (abstract). She also adds that: “in the later period it was a vocation which was particularly associated with pious laywomen who appear to have opted for this extreme way of life in their thousands throughout western Europe, often as an alternative to marriage or remarriage, allowing them, instead, to undertake the role of ‘living saint’ within the community” (abstract). Although *Laxdæla saga* does not grant detailed information about Gudrun becoming a “living saint” in her community as McAvoy argues, yet as

the saga states, Gudrun was growing old and clearly wanted to change her life when she became a devout Christian and wished to devote her life to God as a religious woman.

As Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker states in her book *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*: “recluses were therefore faithful who freed themselves from the confining bonds of society but did not necessarily remove themselves from society as such. They sought a spot where they could devote themselves completely to the love of God, without a fixed rule and without an imposed form of life” (6). This statement seems the closest to why Gudrun would find the anchoritic way of life appealing. However, as much as the saga suggests how easy it was for Gudrun to turn to the anchoritic lifestyle, Margaret Wade Labarge in her book *Sound of the Trumpet: Medieval Women in Europe*, argues that it was a serious endeavor to become an anchoress: “The life of a recluse could not be taken on casually. The permission of the bishop of the diocese was required before a woman—who could be a maid, a widow, or a nun—could be enclosed. The candidate’s character and estate had to be investigated, as well as the suitability of the place chosen for her cell” (125). Undoubtedly, the anchoress has to be of sound mind and steady disposition in order to thrive as a recluse.

Although it is declared that Gudrun was famous for being a deeply religious person, the saga does not give any full detail about her life as a nun or an anchoress which highlights what Brian Patrick McGuire states in his essay *Cistercian Nuns in Twelfth –and-Thirteenth century Denmark and Sweden*: “However difficult it is for us to reach the daily life of such places and to see how the sisters perceived their lives, we can at least claim that their prayers were considered essential” (182). Although not deeply discussed by the narrator of the saga, Gudrun’s role as a nun and an anchoress, it can be argued, was viewed as important. However, the saga soon overlooks Gudrun, one of the most powerful and important female characters in *Laxdæla saga*:

“Gudrun lived to a great age and is said to have lost her sight. She died at Helgafell and is buried there” (421). Even though it is not mentioned in the saga, Gudrun could very likely have been buried at her church, thereby reinforcing her spirituality. However, Gudrun’s death is but a remark. It can only be assumed since Gudrun converted to Christianity and that Iceland was a Christian nation, the narrator wanted to say as little as possible about her funeral, unlike how the narrator discussed Unn’s pagan funeral with her burial ship. Thus, one of the most significant female characters in the *Laxdæla saga* is dismissed upon her death, and the narrator focuses on her two remaining male relatives briefly. After mentioning what happened to her male relatives, the saga is finished, and Gudrun is referred to no more. This disappearance of Gudrun, is as Rabine argues by analogy in her essay: “assigns femininity its place” (39) and while Rabine states that there is tension in *Tristan and Isolde* between: “Celtic logic and courtly logic” (40), something similar can also be argued for *Laxdæla saga* as there is conflict and tension between powerful women, both pagan, and Christian, and the clerical Christian outlook in this saga which brings about as Rabine believes: “a new ideological structure, a new literary form, a new concept of sexuality, and a value system for a new European culture” (40).

Even though the women of these various narratives fade away, and the focus is returned to the male figures, they each are still considered thought-provoking yet problematic women by critics and readers alike. Legendary women such as Modthryth and Alfhild are unruly because of their fierce personalities and how they embrace men’s roles. Gudrun, in comparison, is a powerful and wise woman with a strong personality who becomes a devout Christian as Iceland’s first nun and anchoress.

CHAPTER 4

ÆLFTHRYTH

Unlike *Beowulf's* Modthryth or Wealhtheow, who were queens who did not practice any visible signs of religion, Christian or otherwise, Anglo-Saxon queens, such as Queen Ælfthryth, were often Christians. Anglo-Saxon queens had to ensure, with pressure by clerics and possibly themselves that their husband would convert and be baptized in the Christian faith. The monk Bede has in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* numerous queens who were Christian, but were married to pagan husbands. Klein explains this arguably common occurrence:

There are many ways of construing how this model might have worked in practice: conversion as an act motivated by a king's desire to mollify his wife; conversion as an act forced upon a king by his wife's native family as a bride-price; conversion as an act voluntarily agreed upon by a king seeking powerful dynastic connections; or conversion as an act undertaken by a king as a result of his wife's persuasive counsel on the merits of Christianity (51).

Klein also states: "Nevertheless, as Bede painstakingly works to elide the power of Christian wives in England's spiritual development and to reconfigure that power so that he and people like himself have a share in it, his efforts are themselves a sign of royal women's power during the age of conversion" (52). Yet Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing argue in their book *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, that in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*: "the conversions of kings, as we might expect, is of far greater importance than the conversion of queens" (35). This comment highlights once again

the disparity and importance between men's religious beliefs in contrast to women's representations in literature.

Ælfthryth, (c. 940-1000/01) and her husband, King Edgar, were Christians, in contrast with the fictional royal woman of Wealhtheow, Modthryth, or Alfhild. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Ælfthryth and Edgar were married during the year: "965. In this year King Edgar took Elfthryth as his queen. She was the daughter of Ealdorman Ordgar" (76).

The Melrose Chronicle, which was written at the prestigious abbey of Ely, gives more information on Ælfthryth, her husband Edgar, and her family: A.D. 964. The peaceful king of the Angles, Edgar, took to wife the daughter of Ordgar, the duke of Devonshire, Elsthrida by name ; by whom he had two sons, Edmund and Egelred. By Elfleda the Fair, the daughter of duke Ordmer, he had previously had Edward (who was afterwards king and Martyr), and by St. Wultritha he had Edgitha, a virgin dedicated to God. In the same year king Edgar placed monks in New Minster and Middilton, and appointed as their abbots Etelgar and Kineard respectively (100).

Like most of the women in this thesis, Ælfthryth, or Elfrida as she is sometimes called, was considered wicked and unruly. Rumors were about that Ælfthryth murdered her step-son, King Edward the "Martyr ". As Elizabeth Norton states in her book *England's Queens*: "By the early eleventh century, whilst Ethelred was still alive, the blame was already commonly attributed to those about the Queen, and in the mid-eleventh, the *Life of Saint Dunstan* by Osbern specifically laid the blame at Elfrida's door" (50). However, even if her reputation is murky, Norton also adds: "She was undoubtedly one of the greatest and most prominent of all Anglo-Saxon queens and one of the most powerful women in medieval England" (51). Ælfthryth was

also deeply interested in the Benedictine religious reform. Norton explains: “Edgar called a council which produced a famous document, the *Regularia Concordia*. This document set out the rules by which monks and nuns were expected to live. Elfrida as queen, was given a specified political role, with Edgar declaring: ““that his queen Ælfthryth, should be the protectress and fearless guardian of the monasteries”” (48) and that Ælfthryth “was placed in direct control of all the English nunneries” (48). This illustrates how much power and authority Ælfthryth wielded as a Christian queen. She was the complementary half of her husband, King Edgar. This investment of power can also suggest a close bond between the couple and an acknowledgment of Ælfthryth’s faith as a Christian as well as her keen desire for religious reform. Queen Ælfthryth also became the founder of the Benedictine Wherwell Abbey in Hampshire and the Benedictine Abbey Amesbury in Wiltshire. *Women Saints’ Lives in Old English Prose* by Leslie A. Donovan further argues how important royal women were to the ruling dynasty in spreading religious faith throughout the land:

Royal women wielded particular influence on the development of Anglo-Saxon religious culture. Not only were women born into royal families married to insure political and economic alliances, but many of them were also placed in religious communities to establish spiritual affiliations. Affiliations with spiritual authorities and with influential religious communities were often as valuable to royal families as secular confederations of power (20)

Although Donovan is undoubtedly talking about young women from royal backgrounds who are dedicated to nunneries, Ælfthryth’s foundation of Wherwell is a good indication that she established “spiritual affiliations” through her nunnery.

Timothy Venning provides even more material about the Queen Ælfthryth in his book *The Kings and Queens of Anglo-Saxon England*, specifically on religious matters: “She was a generous patron of the Church in her later years (traditionally put down to repentance), particularly of the monasteries at Ely and Peterborough, and founded and endowed the new nunnery at Wherwell in northern Hampshire” (161). Venning also explains Ælfthryth’s notorious reputation was probably due to Church opposition: “Her reputation was hopelessly lost due to the circumstances of her son’s accession and his later failings, but Church hostility was a crucial factor and it may be that she was no more than a shrewd and political noblewoman, politically active and intent on defending her interests” (162). The English translated version of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states:

(979) In this year King Edward was killed at the gap of Corfe on 18 March in the evening, and he was buried at Wareham without any royal honours. And no worse deed than this for the English people was committed since first they came to Britain. Men murdered him, but God honoured him. In life he was an earthly king; he is now after death a heavenly saint. His earthly kinsmen would not avenge him, but his heavenly Father has greatly avenged him. The earthly slayers wished to blot out his memory on earth, but the heavenly Avenger has spread abroad his memory in heaven and in earth, those who would not bow to his living body, now bend humbly on their knees to his dead bones, now we can perceive that the wisdom and contrivance of men and their plans are worthless against God’s purpose” (79).

The chronicler places the blame on King Edward’s “earthly kinsmen” who did not avenge his murder, which could be an implication against his stepmother Queen Ælfthryth or even his half-brother Æthelred II, who became King after him.

The Melrose Chronicle is even more in-depth about King Edward's murder and places blame on Queen Ælfthryth:

A.D. 978. Edward, king of England, was secretly stabbed with a dagger by the orders of his step-mother, queen Alstritha, at the place called Corvesgate ; and so was unjustly slain by his own people. He was buried at Werham, in a fashion unbecoming a king. His brother Eldred, the illustrious etheling, (of elegant manners, a beautiful countenance, and comely presence,) was consecrated king at Kingistun, after the festival of Easter, upon Sunday the eighteenth of the kalends of May [14th April], by the holy archbishops Dunstan and Oswald, and ten bishops. He held the kingdom for thirty-eight years, in many calamities, and this or account of the murder of his brother, whom his mother had wickedly slain. The blessed Dunstan had openly prophesied (for he was full of the spirit of prophecy) that these troubles would happen to him in his kingdom, using these words: Inasmuch as thou hast aspired to the kingdom by the death of thy brother whom thy mother ignominiously slew, therefore hear thou the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord : The sword shall not depart from thy house, but shall rage against thee all the days of thy life, and shall slay thy seed, until thy kingdom shall be transferred into another kingdom, the service and language of which the nation over which thou rulest knoweth not; nor shall thy sin, nor the sins of thy mother, nor the sins of the men who entered with thee into it; this wicked counsel, be expiated save by a long punishment (102).

Pauline Stafford asserts in her book *Unification and Conquest*:

Though the stereotypes of wicked stepmothers have coloured the accusations, it is difficult not to see it done by those who felt she would approve. Ælfthryth was a

benefactor of churches and an ally of bishops on whom political murder may be felt to sit ill; but arguments based on consistency of character are dubious, never more so than in this period when character cannot be known. The forms of political action open to women were limited to the intrigues of court, survival in that world their only hope. If we cannot know whether she planned the murder, it is certain that she benefited from it” (58-9).

Stafford argues that if Ælfthryth truly murdered her stepson so that her own son could rule in his place, the murder could have been what she wanted so she could have power for herself. She would have prestige because her own son would rule as King of England, not her stepson, from a previous marriage. Earenfight concludes about this tantalizing mystery: “It is difficult to know the truth when so much of what is known about her sounds like a conventional list of evil deeds tinged with salacious gossip and innuendo, exaggerated and embellished much later by authors who clearly feared and resented such a politically active and important woman” (106-7). Whether Edward’s death was authorized by an act of self-preservation or motivated by jealousy, truthfully, it is unclear if Ælfthryth really did murder her stepson, thereby highlighting the different suppositions by the various authors I have examined as well as the contemporary writers from Ælfthryth’s time. It would be interesting to know what the powerful clergy thought and said about Ælfthryth during that mystifying time, as Chance narrowly questions about royal women: “If they remained passive peacemakers, they were accepted by society; if they attempted to gain sovereignty in a kingdom without manifesting chastity and sanctity, they were accused of lechery and immorality” (61). Chance seems to be creating a narrow sphere for queens who were either good and holy or wicked and irredeemable. Nevertheless, even if Ælfthryth was an unruly and notorious woman, English society, the clergy, and her biographer Elizabeth Norton views

her as an astute and influential queen who was deeply concerned with religious matters like the Benedictine reforms.

Ælfthryth was involved with the Benedictine religious reforms that swept through England, as Norton explains in a biography of Ælfthryth, *Elfrida: The First Crowned Queen of England*, that there was: “criticism centering on the lack of discipline in the religious houses” (76). The reform movement actually originated in Europe and the religious figures wanted a return to “an idealized view of earlier monasticism” (77). Norton adds that Dunstan, one of the main reformers, made certain “that the monks ate in a common refectory and slept in a dormitory” (78), thus demonstrating that the monks had let this particular practice lapse into obscurity. Norton reinforces Ælfthryth’s prominence during her husband’s reign as she argues that Ælfthryth was one of the key reformers of this movement, as she “appears prominently in the documents of Edgar’s reign that related to the Church reform and she was probably present at many of the councils and meetings at which the reform was discussed” (101). Because of this markedly noticeable position, Norton argues that Ælfthryth “should be considered one of the people most strongly involved in the continuation of female monasticism and its reform in England” (91). Apparently, the male reformers were uninterested in female monasticism, however Ælfthryth was definitely interested in such matters. Norton remarks that the male clergy were not interested in nun’s roles during this time of reform. She argues that because Ælfthryth dedicated her stepdaughter to a nunnery, was a founder of two nunneries, and was a generous benefactor, meant she was deeply interested in female monasticism, in comparison to the male clergy’s lack of interest (92).

Barbara Yorke also gives more information in her book *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, about the power of Ælfthryth and her nunnery of Wherwell: “Queen Ælfthryth is

even more closely associated with the foundation of the two remaining new royal nunneries of the tenth century, Amesbury and Wherwell. A confirmation of privileges from her son King Æthelred II to the community at Wherwell provides the earliest evidence for Ælfthryth's role in 'diligently building up' the nunnery" (78). Ælfthryth's authority is continued through the use of these grants given to her by her son which highlights her use of power in providing for her two nunneries, especially for Wherwell.

Yorke discusses Ælfthryth's rumored murder of her step-son, King Edward "the Martyr" and how this deed affected both her and Wherwell:

Narratives purporting to describe the circumstances of foundation date from after the Norman Conquest, and links Ælfthryth's patronage with her need for expiation following her involvement in the murder of her stepson Edward the Martyr, a tale which had grown in the telling, for Ælfthryth is not explicitly implicated in the earliest account of Edward's death. Even the Wherwell cartulary recorded the guilt of the abbey's foundress while her obituary claims that she founded the house 'to beg Christ's pardon for the death of her wounded step-son Edward and the shedding of his blood (79).

The Melrose Chronicle specifically states that Ælfthryth founded Wherwell and Amesbury: "A.D. 979. Pope John died, and was succeeded by Benedict. Ailtritha (Elfthryth), formerly the queen, and the murderess of St. Edward the king, in her repentance, built two monasteries, Warewelle and Ambresbiri (Wherwell and Amesbury) (102).

Even though Yorke states that there is some dispute surrounding the foundation's establishment (79), Wherwell is still considered Ælfthryth's nunnery. She was sufficiently close to it to be buried there and not at her other nunnery, Amesbury. This preference shows that

Wherwell was important to Ælfthryth, whether as a source of contrition over her step-son's murder or simply because it was another expression of her influence as queen. Although Yorke explains that Ælfthryth's nunneries were not as well off as other Anglo-Saxon religious houses, they were still important: "The Domesday Book entries show Amesbury and Wherwell to have been significantly poorer than the other nunneries patronized by the royal house in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Their modest holdings may be attributed to relatively late foundation towards the end of the period in which the royal houses were most active in their support for nunneries" (79). Even though these two nunneries, especially Wherwell, were considered poor and founded late, they are still potent symbols of Ælfthryth's power as a queen and a devout woman. Amesbury and Wherwell themselves exist as a memorial to Ælfthryth, thereby keeping alive her memory as a Christian woman and a great, though unruly queen.

Like many other queens who withdrew from public life and lived in retirement in their particular religious houses, Ælfthryth did the same when she grew old, as Norton states: "It was not unusual for elderly widowed queens to take holy orders or, at least, spend time in a religious community, something that is likely to have appealed to Elfrida given her religious views" (191). Norton emphasizes that Ælfthryth chose to spend an increasing amount of her time at her nunnery of Wherwell (192), which highlights again that she favored Wherwell above her other nunneries as a place of retirement and contemplation. Even though Norton states that many people during Ælfthryth's contemporaries believed that: "the idea that Elfrida went to Wherwell to atone for the death of Edward the Martyr was widespread in the later medieval period, but is probably a misinterpretation of the queen's increasing attempts as she aged to follow something of a religious rule and ascetic life" (192-93). This is in contrast with Yorke's statement that Ælfthryth did not take any religious vows: "Ælfthryth is said have spent her last years at

Wherwell and is presumed to have died there, but is not claimed that she took any specific vows” (79). In contrast with Yorke’s ambivalence: Norton gives specific information in regards to Ælfthryth’s death as she argues that the queen died: “on 17 November. The year is not accurately recorded and it was 1000, 1001, or possibly 1002.” (195). Sadly, Ælfthryth is soon forgotten, as Norton states: “knowledge of her tomb was forgotten in the later medieval period when her nunnery ceased even to celebrate her *obit* in its calendar of devotions” (195). Even though Ælfthryth is considered notorious for her alleged murder of her stepson and domineering personality, she is still a remarkable and powerful Christian ruler.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Ælfthryth is in strong contrast between the legendary and pagan royal women such as *Beowulf's* Wealhtheow or Modthryth and Saxo Grammaticus's Alfhild. Ælfthryth can be regarded as quite similar to the Icelandic Gudrun, who after a worldly lifestyle, chooses to become a deeply religious woman. Ælfthryth, although she was viewed as a wicked and scandalous woman because of her possible involvement in the murder of her stepson King Edward "the Martyr", she was still a devout and powerful woman. She wielded great authority in England during the time of her husband, King Edgar, as a leader of the nunneries and as a regent for her son, King Æthelred II.

Each of these significant and fascinating women highlights the tension between the pagan and Christian boundaries in the texts in which we read about them, especially if they are viewed as wicked or unruly women, such as daring shield-maidens or fierce queens who ruled in a cruel and unapproved manner. Interestingly, as Klein states of the fictional women in Anglo-Saxon literature, which also can be applied to the women of *Beowulf*: "Unlike their later medieval counterparts, Anglo-Saxon writers did not position legendary royal women within misogynist diatribes. . . . Rather, Anglo-Saxon writers positioned legendary women in the midst of texts that were designed to express their authors' views on the most difficult and contentious issues of Anglo-Saxon society" (194-5). This idea is embodied by the figure of Modthryth, who is viewed unapprovingly by the narrator as a beautiful, yet cruel woman who is heedless of her role as a "peace-weaver". She practices none of the customs that the other queens in *Beowulf* such as Wealhtheow or Hygd perform, such as being generous toward her thanes or handing out the

mead to the warriors of the court. However, Modthryth's role as a fierce Valkyrie figure changes when she is married to the hero Offa, and she becomes a generous and compassionate woman in her husband's court.

Alfhild in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* is a fierce female pirate who is comparable to Beowulf's Modthryth. After she is married to her pursuer Prince Alf, Alfhild marries and bears a daughter. After her marriage, she fades from the narrative, even though she is still a significant and valuable character. Her toppling of Scandinavian gender roles causes her to be a figure of power and daring in a world that only dominated by male influence.

Unn is the predecessor of Gudrun, both physically and spiritually since Unn was a pagan woman and lived during pre-Christian times in Iceland. Unn's status as a widow highlights her authority and power as an independent and autonomous woman. Although Unn dies as a pagan woman, she is still viewed as an unusual figure, especially because of her determined and authoritative personality. Unn and Gudrun are both vibrant figures that stand out amongst the other female characters in *Laxdæla saga*.

Gudrun lives a colorful married life and dwells within the boundaries of both paganism and Christianity. She eventually becomes a nun and an anchoress, embodying the change between the pagan Unn with a heathen Iceland to the Christianized Iceland and a devout Gudrun. Although by the end of the saga, Gudrun's importance to the text, after the narrator comments that she died of old age, replaces her significance with remarks about her two remaining male kinsmen. This can argue that an erasure of a seemingly prominent woman is how the narrator or author of this particular text brings back the "male focus" in *Laxdæla saga*'s conclusion.

Although they fade away from the narrative, overall each of these women are valuable and important in their texts. Each new discovery or re-discovery of such women like Gudrun, Alfhild, or Ælfthryth brings their accomplishments and their place in history and literature to life.

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