

# Hrothgar and Wealhtheow: An Onomastic Approach to a Story of Good Governance

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RE-READERS OF *Beowulf* tend to see things they did not see – or seem to see – before. Edward B. Irving, Jr., for example, presented the celebration of Beowulf's defeat of Grendel in *A Reading of Beowulf* sequence titled "The Great Banquet" in 1968; but he did not give attention until 1989 to the meaning of "Heorot," the name of the hall in which the celebration was held, when he wrote in a *Re-Reading Beowulf* chapter titled "The Hall as Image and Character" that the hall the Danes built for Hrothgar after his early victories was "christened like a newborn child" and that "Heorot is also a word in another sense, that of a pledged word, a promise, for the hall is the reward promised by Hrothgar to his warriors in return for their loyalty and prowess in his youthful wars" (137).

Irving's return to "Heorot" brought back a question from my own first reading of *Beowulf* that I will now attempt to answer: Why did Hrothgar's queen, who presided so graciously at the celebration banquet held in Heorot, have a name like "Wealhtheow"? Fr. Klaeber's Glossary – included in the third edition of his *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, which was the text assigned in 1969 for my University of Oregon Studies in Old English course and will be the text cited here – provides "servant, slave" as equivalents for *ðeow*. But queens are not slaves! They help to rule the kingdom! This could not be an appropriate name for a queen! These were my reactions at that time, and Josephine Bloomfield's identification of Klaeber in a 1994 *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* essay titled "Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of "Wealhtheow," as "in his expectations . . . a man of the culture in which he was reared" hardly provided an adequate explanation for the *Beowulf* poet's choice of a name for Hrothgar's queen. Klaeber was the editor, nor the creator of the story. But my continued re-reading of *Beowulf*, along with study of word formation and texts from Old English wisdom literature and the contributions of other re-readers, has now led me to conclude that "Wealhtheow" was a singularly appropriate name for a queen who played an important role in the rule of a kingdom.

This re-reading process led back at one point to the possibility that "Wealhtheow" *could* have been a borrowed name. E. V. Gordon wrote in a 1935 *Medium Ævum* essay titled "Wealhðeow and Related Names" that "Wealhðeow . . . from the nature of its elements must be an old name, not a 'characterizing' name invented by the *Beowulf* poet" (175), which might seem to preclude a possibility that a reason could be found for the poet's assignation of her name. But a question Fred C. Robinson asked in a 1968 *Anglia* essay titled "Some Uses of Names in Old English Poetry" provides a reason to continue to search for an answer to my question about why the *Beowulf* poet named the queen of Heorot as he did. Robinson's "question," which read "Must we exclude the possibility that even unalterable names inherited from tradition can bear pregnant meanings when the poet wishes them to?" was clearly intended to elicit the answer "No"; and, having referred to a "catalogue of instances where OE writers artfully etymologized both Biblical and historical names in their works," he provided this answer to his "question": "I believe that in any of their poems Anglo-Saxons may be expected to construct a dramatic situation or shade a character sketch in such a way as to bring alive some poignant etymological meaning in a proper name received from tradition" (51-52). And Stefan Jurasinski demonstrated in a 2007 *Neophilologus* essay titled "The feminine name Wealhtheow and the problem of Beowulfian anthroponymy" that the elements, if not the whole

name of Wealhtheow's queen, *were* included in multiple documents from recorded history.

The parts of Wealhtheow's name, then, were there, ready for the poet to combine them if he chose to do so, and, though it seems reasonable to accept Jurasinski's conclusion that "Any permanent solution to the problems posed by the name Wealhtheow is likely to elude scholarship" (714) this does not preclude the possibility that re-readers will continue to find meaning in names. Leonard Neidorf, for example, having related the first element of Wealhtheow's name in a 2018 *Neophilologist* essay titled "Wealhtheow and Her Name: Etymology, Characterization, and Textual Criticism" not to "*\*walx*, 'foreign,' but to "*\*wala*," *did* find that *this* word, with its meanings "chosen" and "beloved," presented a reasonable alternative. He concluded, however, that the name the *Beowulf* poet assigned her "does not serve to characterize the queen in any meaningful way" (86).

But I will begin this return to the story the *Beowulf* poet told with a parallel sequence of word formation processes intended to provide a starting point for a demonstration that the names the *Beowulf* poet gave to Hrothgar and to Wealhtheow – while they may not have *determined* the acts he would show they performed – did show his respect for the king *and* the queen who shared a responsibility to maintain the kingdom or empire that came into being when Hrothgar, having been given "heresped" (64b, war-success) and "wiges weorðmynd" (65a, honor of war), acquired a "magodriht micel" (67a, great group of young retainers) and decided to build a greater hall than men had ever heard of from which he could share the gifts that God had given him.

*Hroðgar*  
Base word: gar: spear, dart, javelin  
— or weapon

First element: hroð: glory, benefit

Subtraction: hroð - or = hroð

Addition: hroð + gar =  
hroðgar: weapon-benefit

Proper name: Hroðgar

*Wealhþeow*  
Base word: þeow: servant, not slave

First element: wealh: wealth, not  
captive, carried off in war, as  
Klaeber's Proper Names entry  
may suggest

Addition: wealh + þeow =  
wealhþeow: wealth-servant

Proper name: Wealhþeow

The base word of Hrothgar's name is the masculine noun "gar." Clark Hall and Meritt's *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* provides "spear," "dart," and "javelin" as equivalents for this word, and since the three are members of a group it seems reasonable to read "gar" as "weapon." "Hroð" can be read as a result of subtracting the second syllable of "hroðor," for which the *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* provides the equivalents "solace, joy, pleasure: benefit." "Hroðor" is reduced to "hroð," the two elements are combined, and the result is "hroðgar," which, capitalized, becomes a proper noun, the name of a man whose actions show that he is particularly qualified for leadership. His ability to engage in combat is signified by the base word "gar," and the first syllable of Hrothgar's name could be a reference to the wealth he has gained from that engagement. The significance of "Hrothgar," then, is almost immediately apparent, and his name is clearly an appropriate one for a king.

But a number of readers *have* found Wealhtheow's name to be problematic. Helen Damico, for example, began her consideration of the name of the queen in *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* with a statement that *both* elements of Wealhtheow's name, with their

“significations of servitude,” were “troublesome.” Considering the problems presented by its first syllable she wrote that “although *wealh* does show primary meanings of “Celt” and “foreigner,” it also has secondary meanings of “slave” and “servant,” which would seem to preclude their appropriateness as “the name for the queen of the Danes, the mother of kings, [and] the regulator of court decorum” (62). And D’Amico also found “þeow,” the base word of Wealhtheow’s name, to be problematical, since it “carries a particular meaning of ‘slave,’ and in its derived forms conveys the idea of ‘servile,’ ‘not free,’ or in ‘bondage.’” And this led her to conclude that “The compound’s most general meaning, ‘foreign slave,’ is a curious appellative for the queen of the Danes” (59).

But “þeow,” as Neidorf noted, is also the base element of “Ecgþeow,” Beowulf’s father’s name. And Klaeber, having provided “sword” as an equivalent for “ecg” in his “Proper Names” glossary, also provides “servant” as an equivalent for þeow (434). “Ecgþeow,” then, could be literally translated as “Swordservant,” which brings me back to one of the questions I asked myself when I first read *Beowulf*: If “þeow” does not mean “slave” in the name of Beowulf’s father, why should it mean “slave” in the name of Hrothgar’s queen?

As for the *Beowulf* poet’s *intention* (it is hard to avoid the intentional fallacy in situations like this), I will stop short of trying to prove that “Hrothgar” and “Wealhtheow” are examples of “nominal determinism,” which can be defined as a writer’s choice of a name with an intention to determine the character of the person named. Instead, in the following consideration of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow’s performance of acts required for the maintenance of their kingdom, or empire, I will simply give attention to possible relationships between those acts and the names the *Beowulf* poet assigned to the characters who perform them.

Hrothgar is referred to by his proper name a number of times in the sequence that precedes his appearance with Wealhtheow at the banquet with which they welcome Beowulf to their hall; and the references are often accompanied by expressions of respect, as when the *Beowulf* poet follows his report of Hrothgar’s “herespede” (battle success) and “wiges weorðmynd” (honor gained from war) with these words of praise for his generosity: “He beot ne aleh, beagas dælde, sinc æt symle” (80-81a, He did not leave his promise unfulfilled, dispensed precious rings, treasure at the feast”). He becomes the object of Grendel’s “wicked deeds” and “enmity,” but even as he is said to have continually experienced the sorrow of his time he retains his identity as “maga Healfdenes” (90a, kinsman of Healfdene), a nominalization that carries respect for his high social rank. Referring to him by his proper name, the poet writes that Hrothgar sat, “old and very hoary, with his band of retainers” (356b-57), and it is clear that he is no longer able to defend his people. But further references to the king are nevertheless accompanied by positive associations. When Wulfgar, identified by Klaeber as “an official of the court of Hrothgar,” announces Beowulf’s arrival and presents his request for an exchange of words he addresses Hrothgar as “þeoden min” (365a, my lord) and “glædman Hroðgar” (367b, kind gracious Hrothgar); and when Hrothgar responds to this good news, he is referred to as “Hroðgar . . . helm Scyldinga” (371, Hrothgar, helmet, protector of the Scyldings). And thus, despite his inability to defend them from the attacks of Grendel, Hrothgar’s status as the leader of his people is re-affirmed.

Beowulf addresses Hrothgar by his proper name when he greets him with the words “Wæs þu, Hroðgar, hall” (407a, “Be well, Hrothgar”) before introducing himself as “Higelaces mæg and magoðegn” (407b-408a, Higela’s kinsman and young retainer). Continuing, he addresses Hrothgar as “þeoden Hrothgar” (417a, king Hrothgar); “brego Beorht-Dena” (427a, chief of the Bright-Danes); “eodor Scyldinga” (428a, protector/prince of the Scyldings); “wigendra hleo” (429b, protector of warriors), and “freowine folca” (430a, friend and lord of the people). Hrothgar clearly, desperately, needs help, but the nominalizations with which Wulfgar and Beowulf address him nevertheless show their respect, and the poet refers to the king again as “Hroðgar . . . helm Scyldinga” (456, Hrothgar, protector/lord of the Scyldings) when he presents his response to

Beowulf's request to be permitted to help him. The “sinces brytta (607b, giver of treasure) and “brego Beorht-Dena” (609a, lord of the Bright-Danes) rejoices and welcomes the young hero, and recalls with pleasure the time he knew him as a boy.

And now we begin to see the role that Wealhtheow plays. Beowulf has arrived. The Danes and visiting Geats are gathered together in the hall and a scene of conviviality develops in which Hrothgar and Wealhtheow play their respective roles. Sometimes, as the following lists show, they are referred to by their proper names alone or just a common noun or pronoun, but in Wealhtheow's as well as Hrothgar's case the poet often adds words and phrases that carry respect.

*Hrothgar and Wealhtheow*

<p>guman – man (614b)          East-Dena eþelweard – guardian of          the native land of the East Danes (616)          hine – him (617a)          sigerof kyning – victorious, illustrious king          (623b)          hire frean – her lord (641b)          sunu Healfdenes – son of Halfdane (645a)          guma, Hroðgar – one man, Hrothgar (653a)          Hroðgar -- Hrothgar (662a)          wigfruma – war-chief (664a)</p>	<p>Wealhþeow (612b)          cwen Hroðgares -- queen/ wife of          Hrothgar (613a)          goldhroden (614a)          freolic wif – noble, excellent wife (615a)          ides Helminga -- woman/lady of          (619b) the Helmings (620b)          hio / beaghroden cwen – she, ring-adorned          queen          heo – she (627a)          æt Wealhþeow – from Wealhtheow (629b)          þam wif – to the woman/lady (639a)          goldhroden freolicu folccwen -- gold-adorned          noble/ excellent queen (640b-41a)          Wealhþeo -- (664b)          cwen -- queen (665a)</p>
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As the welcoming scene begins, Wealhtheow is referred to by her proper name in line 612b and identified in the immediately following a-line as Hrothgar's wife; and Stanley B. Greenfield's translation of ll. 612b-15, which reads

Wealththeow stepped forth;  
 Hrothgar's good queen, mindful of custom,  
 Gold-adorned, greeted men in the hall (*A Readable Beowulf*, 56),

makes it easy to see the respect with which the *Beowulf* poet presents the queen. And then, with the words with which she addresses her husband — “freohdrihten min” (my noble lord), “sinces brytta” (giver of treasure), and “gold-wine gumena” (gold-friend of men) --- Wealhtheow shows *her* respect to Hrothgar as the leader of their people.

The *Beowulf* poet continues to refer to Hrothgar with complimentary phrases as this sequence develops. He is the “East-Dena eþelweard” (616b, guardian of the native land of the East Danes and a “sigerof kyning” (619b, victorious, illustrious king), and the magnificence of his hall and the splendid appearance of his queen show that he has the means to generously reward the hero who has come to his aid.

Continuing to perform her social responsibilities, Wealhtheow presents the ceremonial cup

to Beowulf, and he responds by taking it in his hand and re-affirming the “boast,” or heroic promise, he made when he first set forth on his journey to Hrothgar’s kingdom. He will win the battle with Grendel or he will die. And Beowulf’s speech, the poet writes, is pleasing to Wealhtheow. Dong-ill Lee may have overstated when he wrote in a 1999 *Medieval Studies* essay titled “Wealhtheow’s Verbal Tactics” that “The execution of her social duties is used by Wealhtheow as a means of *extracting* [emphasis mine] from Beowulf the promises she seeks” (56), but she *is* the person Beowulf addresses when he re-commits himself to the defense of Heorot — and the poet writes that his words were pleasing to her.

The welcoming scene continues with convivial exchanges and music until it ends with Hrothgar the war-chief placing his hall for the first time in the hands of another man and seeking Wealhtheow, his queen, for “æfenræste” (night-rest). And then, as we know, “Com on wanre niht scriðan sceadugenga”! Who could forget the coming of the “walker in darkness” in the dark night that follows? The stories of Grendel’s attack, his defeat by Beowulf, and Hrothgar’s adoption of Beowulf are told; and we are back once again in the hall in the presence of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow, who are represented below with the words with which the *Beowulf* poet refers to them in

*A Celebration of Beowulf’s Victory*

<i>Hrothgar</i>	<i>Wealhtheow</i>
Healfdenes sunu – Halfdane’s son (1009b) self cyning – king himself (1010a) Hroðgar – Hrothgar (1017) bearn Healfdenes – son of Halfdane (1020b) eorla hleo – protector of nobles (1035a) sunu Healfdenes – son of Halfdane (1040b) mære þeoden – illustrious king (1046b) hordweard hæleþa – guardian of treasure (1047a) eorla drihten –retainers’ chief (1050) freodrihten min – my noble, dear lord (1169b) sinceas brytta – dispenser of treasure (1170a) goldwine men -- gold-friend of men (1171a)	ides Scyldinga – lady of the Scyldings (1168b) Wealhðeo -- Wealhtheow (1215a) heo – she (1215b)

Hrothgar, sadly, could not defend his hall from the attacks of Grendel – the toll that age extracts cannot be denied – but the poet continues to refer to him with respect and with the words with which his queen and Beowulf address him. Hrothgar is still the “beahhorda weard” (guardian of the ring-hoard) and the “sinceas brytta” (dispenser of treasure) when he comes to the hall to celebrate Beowulf’s victory accompanied by his *cwen* (queen).

And what role does Wealhtheow play? As the celebration scene begins “Hrothgar’s “*cwen*,” referred to with reference to her social standing as “ides Scyldinga” (1168b, lady of the Scyldings) before she became the wife of Hrothgar, promptly follows a rule prescribed in “Maxims I,” a text T. A. Shippey included in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, a source I have found to be very useful in my effort to understand the names the *Beowulf* poet chose for his characters, when she offers the first cup to the king. She continues to follow the rules as she gives her warrior husband,

who has now ruled as king of the Danes for many years, with words of advice concerning his social skills. Respectfully addressing him as “freodrihten min, sinces brytta” (my lord, giver of treasure) she proceeds to tell Hrothgar what to do.

þu on sælum wes,  
goldwine gumena, ond to Geatum spræc  
mildum wordum, swa sceal man don!  
Beo wið Geatas glæd, geofena gemyndig,  
nean ond feorran þu nu hafast. (1169-74)

“Be happy,” Wealhtheow says --- and her verbs are in the imperative form ---“and speak to the Geats with gracious words, as a man ought to do.” Then, having repeated her command to be happy, Wealhtheow tells Hrothgar to be generous with the gifts from far and near that he now has. Considering the number of times the *Beowulf* poet has identified Hrothgar with reference to his generosity it might not seem necessary for his wife to give him this advice, but the set of qualifications for king *and* queen in “Maxims I” include a requirement that the queen have an ability to “him ræd witan” (ll.68-9), which, translated loosely, can be read “know how to give him [the king] good advice.”

It might seem that there is little need for reticence when Wealhtheow is just telling her husband to have a good time and see that his guests are well received. But the following phrase, “Me man sægde” (1175, “To me someone said”) may, like Modern English sentences that begin “I heard that . . . ,” be read as a sign of a certain reluctance to introduce a subject. Wealhtheow is not going to start an argument about whether Hrothgar should or should not have adopted Beowulf. (It would be too late for this anyway. As the *Beowulf* poet tells the story of his joyful response to the young warrior’s defeat of Grendel in ll. 946b-50 Hrothgar has already adopted Beowulf, and promised him that he can have any part of his own wealth that he may ask for.) She simply expresses her happiness that Heorot has been cleansed and asserts that she knows that Hrothgar’s nephew Hrothulf, who could be expected to succeed Hrothgar if he dies before one of their sons is old enough to take on the responsibilities of leadership, will treat them well — if he remembers how good Hrothgar and Wealhtheow have been to *him*.

Hrothgar has already taken a step that Wealhtheow might have advised him not to take, but the gift-giving that follows is well in line with what would be expected of a king who built a hall to share his wealth. As Arthur Brodeur wrote in an *Art of Beowulf* chapter titled “Setting and Action,” the first act Hrothgar performs in the celebration scene that follows Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel is his “presentation to Beowulf of a golden banner, a helmet, sword, and corslet”; and expresses his approval by adding that “these are at one and the same time appropriate rewards for the slaying of Grendel and the material pledge of his adoption of Beowulf” (118-19). And it may be possible to read the poet’s report that one of the eight horses that Hrothgar gives to Beowulf carries his own war saddle as a sign of what adoption by a king who gained his high position by successful combat must mean. His successor would be obligated to show the same determination that motivated the man who preceded him.

As the celebration continues Wealhtheow serves Beowulf a cup of mead, encourages him to enjoy the gifts she now presents to him, praises him for his successes, wishes him well, asks for his support of her sons (who are seated close by), and concludes with a promise that she will reward him in a sequence that reads

“Bruc ðisses beages, Beowulf leofa,  
hyse, mid hæle, ond þisses hrægles neat,  
þeo[d] gestreona, ond geþeoh tela,

Nelson

cen þec mid cræfte, ond þyssum cnryhtum wes  
lara liðe! Ic þe þæs lean geman. (1216-20)

Enjoy these rings, dear Beowulf,  
young man, with good luck, and enjoy this corslet,  
the people's treasure, and prosper well,  
show yourself with strength, and to these boys be  
kind in teaching! I will reward you for this.

Continuing, she gives attention to the fame Beowulf has earned:

Hafast þu gefered, þæt ðe feor ond neah  
ealne wideferhþ weras ehtigað,  
efne swa side swa sæ bebugeð,  
windgeard, weallas. (1221-24a)

You have performed [such heroic deeds] that  
far and near, even as far as the sea  
surrounds the home of the winds,  
the cliff walls, men praise you.

Wishing him well, she says

Wes þenden þu lifige,  
æðeling, eadig! (1224b-25a)

May you be noble, blessed,  
As long as you live!

And then, having performed her hostess roles of offering the cup to king and guest, presenting gifts, praising the receiver, and wishing him well ---- all of which are in accordance with requirements prescribed in "Maxims I" --- Wealhtheow takes on a protective mother role as she tells Beowulf to

Beo þu suna minum  
dædum gedefe, dreamhealdene! (1226b-27)

Be kind in deeds  
to my sons, keeping the joy!

And finally, with the words "doð swa ic bidde" (do as I tell you, 1231b), she assumes a motherly – and queenly – right to tell the young Beowulf to do what she tells him to do.

The hall grows quiet as the guests "Sigon þa to slæpe" (1251, sink then to sleep), and it is clear that Wealhtheow has performed her duties with a dignity that befits her position — and perhaps even gone beyond what might be expected. But, as what has been read as the main story of *Beowulf* continues, Beowulf takes on the task of avenging the death of Æschere, Hrothgar's "runwita," "rædbora," and "eaxlgestealla" (confidant, counselor, and shoulder-companion, 1325-26a), who met his death in the grip of Grendel in the story of the first great monster fight. He wins his battle with Grendel's mother and returns again to Heorot, bringing Grendel's severed head as a

further token of victory. (Grendel’s arm, readers will remember, was installed as a first token.)

At this point Beowulf, who is himself referred to with the honorific phrase “beorn Ecgþeowes” (son of Ecgtheow, 1651b), greets the king as “sunu Healfdenes, leod Scyldingas” (son of Healfdene, man of the Scyldings, 1652b-53a) and presents to him the *deus ex machina* sword that suddenly appeared and enabled him to slay Grendel’s mother. Hroðgar looks upon the sword with awe, and then the gift-giving process is reversed when Hrothgar, referred to as “se wisa . . . sunu Healfdenes” (the wise son of Halfdane, 1698b-99a), responds with what may be considered a greater gift — a gift of wisdom gained from experience, an extended sermon on the sin of pride. And everyone in the hall listens in silence.

The time comes when Beowulf must depart. He promises Hrothgar that *his* king, Hygelac, will provide friendship and support to Hrothgar’s son Hrethric --- and though Wealhtheow is not mentioned here it would seem that her concern for her sons can be heard almost as an echo. And then the “hleo eorla (protector of warriors, 1866a), “mago healfdenes” (kinsman of Halfdane, 1867a), “þeoden Scyldinga” (king of the Scyldings, 1871a) sheds tears as he embraces the “guðrinc goldwlanç” (gold-adorned warrior, 1881a) and sends him forth.

Hrothgar was, the poet writes, again ascribing to him all the honor a king, who was after all a mortal being, could attain,

an cyning  
 æghwæs orleahstre, op þæt hine ylðo benam  
 mægenes wynnum . . . (1885b-87a)  
 a king  
 blameless in every way, until age deprived him  
 of the joys of strength.

He *was* forced to acknowledge that he could not defend his hall himself, but Hrothgar fulfills his promise to reward the man who came to its defense. When Beowulf’s ship sets forth it is laden with “herewæðum, hringedstefna, mearum ond maðmum” (1897-98a, armor, rings, horses, and treasures).

And now we turn to the court of King Hygelac to find Beowulf reunited with Hygelac -- his uncle, the king he serves, and the man he will succeed as king – and find the poet continuing to identify Hrothgar with respect to his fame and family identity and Wealhtheow with respect to her royal status and role as co-ruler of their kingdom and --- for the first time, as a “friðusibb folca” (2017a, pledge of peace of the people). And here a rule from “Maxims I,”

Cyning sceal mid ceape cwene gebicgan,  
 bunum and beagum (11-12a)

which Shippey translates “A king shall pay *bride-price* for a *queen* [emphasis mine], with rings and goblets” (69), would seem to provide further reason to refuse to see Wealhtheow’s name as an indicator of inferior status.

*In the Court of King Hygelac*

<i>Hrothgar</i>	<i>Wealhtheow</i>
Hroðgare — Hrothgar (1990b)	mæru cwen — famous/glorious/illustrious queen
mære ðeodne — famous king (1992a)	
Suð-Dene sylfe — South-Dane himself (1996)	
Hroðgar — Hrothgar (2010b)	(2016b)

se mæra mago Healfdenes — the famous kinsman of Half-Dene (2011) Hroðgare — Hrothgar (2129a) leodfruman — prince of the people (2130a) se ðeoden — the king (2131a) he — he (2134b) eorla hleo — protector of noblemen (2142a) maga Healfdenes — kinsman of Half-Dane (2143b) se ðeodcyning — the king of a people (2144a) he — he (2146b) sunu Healfdenes — son of Half-Dane (2147a) Hroðgar — Hrothgar (2155b) snotra fengel — wise king (2156a)	friðusibb folca – pledge of peace of the people (2017a) Wealhðeo — Wealhtheow (2173b)
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Here, in memories recalled during Beowulf's reunion with Hygelac, Hrothgar continues to be identified with respect to *his* fame, family identity, and royal status. As this sequence begins he is referred to as a famous king and South-Dane who has experienced many troubles, and his fame and royal status are brought together in a reference to Hrothgar as “Se mæra mago Healfdenes” (the famous kinsman of Half-Dane) in l. 2011. He is also referred to as the “leodfruma leodfruma” (prince of the people), “eorla hleo” (protector of noblemen), “maga Healfdenes” (kinsman of Half-Dane), and “sunu Healfdenes (son of Half-Dane) in ways that show respect for his genetic heritage as well as his rank and status; and then, with a reference to his proper name, Hrothgar is identified in 2156a as a “snotra fengel,” a prudent, wise king, and remembered for the many treasures – including a boar's head helmet, a coat of mail, and the splendid sword with which he rewarded Beowulf for avenging the slaying of Asher, his confidant and closest friend.

Wealhtheow continues to receive less attention than the *Beowulf* poet gives to Hrothgar, but she is referred to as a “mæru cwen, “famous, glorious” queen in line 2016b; as a “friðusibbe folca,” “pledge of peace” in the immediately following a-verse, and with reference to her gift of a precious necklace to Hygd, Hygelac's queen in 2017a, by her proper name.

The phrase “friðusibbe folca,” like the suggestion that Wealhtheow could have been as a slave, has continued to present difficulties for readers. Jane Chance noted in “The Structural Unity of Beowulf” that “Wealhtheow becomes a peace-pledge or friðusibbe folca (2017) to unite the Danes and the Helmings,” which implies that she was a woman with royal status. But when John L. Sklute felt impelled to write to E. Talbot Donaldson for an explanation, having given attention in “Freoðuwebbe in Old English Poetry” to Donaldson's explanation of “freoðowebbe” – Donaldson noted in his 1966 edition of *Beowulf* that “Daughters of kings were frequently given in marriage to the king of a hostile nation in order to bring about peace” – Donaldson's reply was simply “The most likely explanation is that I made it up, relying on the context . . . and on Klaeber” (209).

But there are other possibilities for finding answers. We cannot be sure of this, but the *Beowulf* poet's identification of Wealhtheow as a “friðusibb folca” *could* have meant that far from being a slave she was a woman of royal birth received as a bride by King Hrothgar as a pledge of peace after he paid the “bride price” prescribed by ll. 11-12b of “Maxims I B.” Christine Fell, having presented a “free translation” of these lines in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* that reads “A king must pay, when he obtains a queen, with cups and rings,” found herself prompted to ask if a queen, like a slave, had to be *purchased*. But T.A. Shippey's rendering of the line in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in*

*Old English*, which reads “A king shall pay *bride-price* [emphasis mine] for a queen, with rings and goblets” (p.68) suggests that in doing so he honors an established custom and that the “cups and rings” he gives are *not* payment for an individual who would become the property of the buyer. They are the satisfaction of a requirement for marriage of persons of royal status.

But, to return to the roles that Wealhtheow was required to play as queen, in her “Structural Unity of *Beowulf*” essay Jane Chance wrote that “Woman functions domestically within the nation as a cup-passer during hall festivities of peace (*freoþo*) and joy (*dream*) after battle or contest,” and we have seen that Wealhtheow fully satisfies this requirement. Then, relating these functions to the meaning of the word “*freoþowebbe*,” Chance found that “The mead-sharing ritual and the cup-passer herself come to symbolize peace-weaving and peace because they strengthen the societal and familial bonds between lord and retainers” (250). Chance expressed her approval of the order in which Wealhtheow passes the cup and her speeches to the king and to Beowulf. She considered her advice to the king to be congenial and generous and her concern for the future of their sons to be completely in line with “Maxims I” rules, and her praise of and advice to Beowulf to be appropriate as well.

And Helen Damico’s evaluation of Wealhtheow’s performance of her duties as Hrothgar’s queen was also strongly positive. Comparing Wealhtheow to the queen of “Maxims I,” a primary text of Old English wisdom literature, Damico wrote in *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* that

One queen may easily serve as blueprint for the other. Both possess excellence of mind ... they have circumspection and deliberateness of speech ... they exhibit generosity, a courtly manner, and a domestic authority commensurate with consorts of royal leaders. They are treasure-givers, counselors to their husbands (a function Wealhtheow under-takes in the second banquet scene), and participate in political matters (a function also depicted in the second banquet scene (22).

As we have seen, the record of Wealhtheow’s appearances fully justifies Damico’s approval. But before leaving the recorded wisdom of “Maxims I,” I would like, since my purpose here has been to show how the names the *Beowulf* poet assigned to Hrothgar and Wealhtheow relate their *shared* obligations, to conclude by giving brief attention to rules prescribed in ll. 11-22 of Part B of “Maxims I” as T.A. Shippey presented them in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*.

The first rule for proper government reads “*Buð sceolon ærest geofum god wesan* (12b-13a, “*Both* [emphasis mine] must first of all be generous with gifts”); and, as we have seen through the *Beowulf* poet’s direct presentations and recollections of their generosity, Hrothgar and Wealhtheow more than adequately satisfied this requirement. The “Maxims I” poet then gives brief attention to a requirement the king must satisfy: “*Guð seal in eorle, wig geweaxan*” (13b-14a, Fighting-spirit must be in the man, valor must grow); and we have also seen that fighting spirit remain even as Hrothgar grows old. Then, with “*ond wif geþeon, leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan* (the woman must be a success, be pleasant to her people, be cheerful, 14b-15), which is followed by the requirement that she offer the first cup to her husband, the “Maxims I” poet gives instruction directly related to the acts Wealhtheow performs as she moves about the hall welcoming guests, acts which can be seen to play an important role in the sharing that helps to maintain their kingdom. And finally, with this requirement, “and him *ræd witan boldagendum bæm ætsomne*,” a difficult line that Shippey translates as “know what advice to give him as joint master and mistress of the house together” (69), the “Maxims” poet gives attention to a further requirement to be satisfied by the queen. She is to give him good advice.

Re-reading her story once again in the twenty-first century and recognizing the importance

of her gracious welcoming of guests, her generous giving of gifts, and her encouragement of her husband to do what he must do, I find myself tempted to tell *her* to go for it, and will conclude with this attempt to use the language of the Beowulf poet: “Ga for hit Wealhþeow!” which, rendered into the English of our time, would read “Go for it Wealththeow!” Regardless of the negative or positive meanings that have been attached to the elements of her name it is clear that Wealththeow was a person who deserved respect for the acts she performed as an individual human being.

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