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LITERATURE

WEALHTHEOW'S PEACE-WEAVING: DIEGESIS AND GENEALOGY OF GENDER IN *BEOWULF*

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ABSTRACT

This article uses Charles S. Peirce's concept of icon and Judith Butler's idea of genealogy of gender to study levels of fictionality in the Old English poem *Beowulf*. It shows that Wealhtheow, the principal female character in the epic, operates as a diegetic reader in the poem. Her speeches, in which she addresses her husband King Hrothgar and Beowulf contain implicit references to the Lay of Finn, which has been sung by Hrothgar's minstrel at the feast celebrating Beowulf's victory. It is argued here that Wealhtheow represents herself as an icon of peace-weaving, as she casts herself as a figuration of Hildeburh, the female protagonist of the Lay of Finn. Hildeburh is the sister of Hnæf, the leader of the Danes, and is given by her brother to Finn the Frisian in a marriage alliance. In her role as a peace-weaver, the queen is to weave peace between tribes by giving birth to heirs of the crown. After the courtly minster's performance of the Lay, Wealhtheow warns her husband against establishing political alliances with the foreigner Beowulf at the expense of his intratribal obligation to his cousin Hrothulf, who is to become king after Hrothgar's death.

Key words: *Beowulf*, Old English poetry, Middle Ages, gender studies, feminist theory

In Old English poetry speech is a means of exercising power and, therefore, the licence to make a speech act is a privilege. In *Beowulf*, like in many other Old English poems, speech acts are introduced by various formulaic devices, whose aim is to provide a sense of importance not only to what is being uttered, but also to highlight the speaker's privileged position. The study of speech acts in *Beowulf* involves the study of social structure of the heroic world depicted in it as well as power relations that bind individuals with fixed social conventions. Inevitably, the way *Beowulf* represents speech and communication reflects hierarchies regarding gender. While men hold the unquestioned positions of influence in the heroic world, the only female speaker in *Beowulf* is Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's wife and queen. Like the speech acts made by other characters, her

own speech acts do not only communicate meaning but also reflect her status as a queen and as a woman. Wealhtheow and her speeches have already been scrutinised by literary critics. The modest aim of this article is to add to *Beowulf*'s rich critical reception by uncovering the layers of representations that construct female subjectivity in *Beowulf* with a special focus on Wealhtheow.

In the poem, Wealhtheow is shown to participate in events of larger political implications. Following Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, Hrothgar extends his parental bond to the hero. What is an act of generosity for the newcomer seems to pose a threat to the political situations in Heorot, since Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf and the king's own sons are in the direct line of succession. Although no character in the poem comments or directly questions Hrothgar's decision, two important events take place. First, during the revelry and feast that follow, Hrothgar's minstrel sings the heroic Lay of Finn. Secondly, Hrothgar's queen Wealhtheow intervenes to remind Hrothgar of the obligations he bears towards his family. The Lay (*Beowulf*, ll. 1071-1159) is a heroic tragedy that carries the memory of ancient hostility between the Danes and the Frisians. In the story, the Danes, whose leader is Hnaef, give Hildeburh, his sister, to Finn the Frisian as wife. The marriage was most probably a peace-pledge that was supposed to solve an earlier military conflict between the two tribes. The union, however, does not bring peace as intended and hostility is renewed. The Danes and the Frisians fight a battle, in which Hildeburh loses her unnamed son and brother Hnæf. Finn's victory over the Danes is inconclusive and he has to share the throne and hall with the Danes, who are now led by Hengest, and treats them on equal terms with his own retainers. Hengest has sworn an oath to Finn that he and his men will not resume war. At the same time, he is bound by his obligation to Hnaef, whose death he is now supposed to avenge. The winter passes and the possibility of return home arouses in Hengest the desire to avenge his kith and kin. Auxiliary forces arrive from Denmark and the war starts. Finn and his men are killed. The Danes return home, taking Hildeburh away with hoards of treasure. Once the Lay has been sung, Wealhtheow serves Hrothgar's guest with cups of mead and turns to her husband to remind him of his duties towards his own kin – his nephew Hrothulf and his own two sons. She then turns to Beowulf and, rewarding him with gifts, requests him to mind Hrothgar's own obligations.

In this scene Wealhtheow emerges as a powerful and commanding figure. She uses strong, masculine language and challenges Hrothgar's authority by placing herself between her husband and Beowulf. Wealhtheow's performance moves across the boundaries that exist between the various levels of fictionality in the poem in two ways. First of all, Wealhtheow's interpretative act is to be discussed as metalepsis, in terms of Gerard Genette's narrative theory, namely the author's or, in this case, the character's transgression of levels of fictionality

(Genette 1972: 235). When she engages in an interpretative act offering her own reading of the Lay, she becomes an intradiegetic reader, an interpreter of an ancient story that stands between the past and present of Hrothgar's kingdom.

Second of all, Wealhtheow appears as a replica of Hildeburh and as an icon of peace-weaving, mirroring Hildeburh as a gift transferred from one treasure-giver to another. Counterpointing Hildeburh, she comes to embody a bridge between the history of the Danes and political reality of Heorot. Wealhtheow, arguably, fashions herself to become an icon of the idealised peace-weaver. Here, the article turns to Charles S. Peirce's sign theory to discuss the semiotic nature of Wealhtheow's self-representation. In his essay "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Sign", Peirce understands an icon to be "a sign which refers to the [o]bject that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same whether any such object exists or not" (Peirce 1965: 102). Wealhtheow turns her body into an iconic representation of peace-weaving that cuts across the narrative levels of the poem.

Wealhtheow's speeches and actions are not only interpretive acts that are politically significant for the heroic world of Hrothgar, Hrothulf and Beowulf. The argument of the present article is that the way Wealhtheow represents herself and, in turn, is represented in the poem is a textual allegory of how female agency is constructed in Old English poetry. The poem records the tension between her own self-fashioning of her subjectivity and the patriarchal terms of her representation as a character. To elucidate on this tension, it is vital to turn to the analogy that Judith Butler forges between gender performatives and theatrical performance.

> The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continuing and incessant *materialising* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body ...
>
> (Butler 2004: 902)

The gold-adorned Wealhtheow turns her body into "a materiality that bears meaning." She appears wearing jewellery and rings that constitute the symbol of male power that objectifies and enslaves her. What she does to her body, to paraphrase Butler, is in a way "fundamentally dramatic". What is particularly conspicuous about her interpretive act is its theatricality. Her self-consciously gendered body is symbolic of her subjugation, as the gold that she is wearing is an intradiegetic allusion to the treasures with which Hildeburh is carried away in the Lay.

Judith Butler's gender theory makes it possible to deconstruct Wealhtheow's speech, carrying a diegetic interpretation of Hildeburh's story, as veiling a ge-

nealogy of gender politics in the heroic world. Butler defines the genealogy of gender in *Gender Trouble* as a deconstruction of "the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for these acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender" (Butler 2008: 45). This is expressed in three ways within the poem: first, in Wealhtheow's performance as a cup-bearer and peace-weaver, arguably, uncovering the masculine economy of exchange that marginalizes her as a woman. Secondly, her speeches uncover the dynamics of tragedy that happens to Hildeburh in the Lay of Finn. And, thirdly, in the way that Wealhtheow uses the story to impose her own understanding of the heroic masculine world that reifies femininity to an object of the masculine economy of exchange. Accordingly, the study will utilize Butler's theory of gender performativity to elucidate on the topic of gender and femininity in the world of *Beowulf*.

In *Beowulf*, the most profound expressions of the masculine economy of exchange are the acts of peace-pledging and peace-weaving. Aristocratic women and queens were often described as *friðusibb* or *freoðuwebbe*, since through producing royal heirs they forged peace between tribes and nations. According to Bosworth and Toller's Old English dictionary, *friðusibb* glosses the Latin *tutela pacis* and *tutela pacifica*, while *freoðuwebbe* appears for *pacis textrix* (Bosworth and Toller 1882: 339, 336).[1] Jane Chance describes the conventional idea on the concept of the peace-weaver:

> The role of woman in *Beowulf,* as in Anglo-Saxon society, primarily depends upon peace-making, either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psychologically as cup-passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall... 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. First, the literal *freoðuwebbe* (peace-weaver, 1942) as she passes the cup from warrior to warrior weaves an invisible web of peace: the order, in which each man is served, according to his social position, reveals each man's dependence upon and responsibility toward another.
>
> (Chance 1986: 98)

In her capacity as a peace-weaver and cup-bearer, Wealhtheow is made to confirm bonds between men. In Peircean terms, the peace-weaver, or peace-pledge, is an iconic representation of the masculine economy of exchange, as the gold-adorned queen bears the signs of masculine royal power that reifies her. The language that Hrothgar's queen speaks is the language of ritual, informed by

[1] Jane Chance (1986: 4-6) identifies three roles played by peace-weavers in the halls: she might be a counsellor, she rewarded warriors with treasure and performed the function of a cupbearer at feasts.

heroic values, and which communicates the terms of exchange that lie at the foundation of bonds and the alliances she weaves by way of biological reproduction. For Gillian Overing (1990: 74), the way Wealhtheow appropriates heroic language shows that "the system of masculine alliance allows women to signify in a system of apparent exchange, but does not allow them signification in their own right". The peace-weaving queen is reified to become the icon and, through motherhood, the embodiment of ritualistic treasure-giving and exchange of vows that cement bonds between men and forge peace between tribes. Wealhtheow, as the image of the body politic, acts in her capacity of the peace-weaver to protect her family and provide her tribe with continuity in peace.

When Beowulf has defeated Grendel, not only does Hrothgar express his gratitude, but, expressing deep affection, he adopts Beowulf. Hrothgar wants Beowulf, the best of men, to become his son [2]:

> Nu ic, Beowulf, þec,
> secg betsta, me for sunu wylle
> freogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela
> niwe sibbe. Ne bið þe nænigra gad
> worolde wilna, þe ic geweald hæbbe.
>
> Now, Beowulf, I will love you, the best of men, as my son in heart. Guard this new alliance well. You will not lack of anything that you desire, if I have it in my power.
>
> (*Beowulf*, ll. 946-950)[3]

Ineluctably, Hrothgar's decision complicates the political scene at Heorot. His nephew Hrothulf is the oldest man in the family and after Hrothgar's death he is expected to succeed the current king. Hrothgar's two sons may become kings only after Hrothulf's death. The narrator's analeptic remarks foreshadow the

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2 It has been noted that Hrothgar's words and actions violate what is considered proper to a man in the heroic world of *Beowulf*. Dockray-Miller (2006: 442) reads Hrothgar as a king "too old to be a man" and suggests that through adopting Beowulf and becoming his father he tries to restore his masculine status. Hrothgar's masculinity is a "'disabled masculinity', a gender construction defined by lack of previously vested power". Hrothgar's adoption "may be a strategy of Hrothgar to recoup some of the power and status of masculinity that he no longer commands: by adopting a son who does make the absolutist, masculine statements that Hrothgar no longer can" (2006: 451). Dockray-Miller claims that the Farewell scene, in which Hrothgar cries with tears seeing off Beowulf, suggests Hrothgar's desire for a homosexual bond.

3 Henceforth indicated as *Beowulf* followed by verse numbers. All quotations taken from Fulk, R. D, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (eds.). 2008. *Klaeber's Beowulf*. (The fourth edition.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press. All translation from Old English to modern English are mine.

future conflict that will arise between Hrothulf and Hrothgar that will eventually destroy Heorot. Even if Hrothgar's decision to adopt Beowulf is a courtesy on Hrothgar's part and is not legally binding, it is bound to bring about an imbalance of power in Denmark. Hrothgar advances Beowulf as the possible heir to the throne and strengthens the exogamic relations at the expense of his endogamic kinship bonds.

The choice of the story on the part of the minstrel is a reaction to Hrothgar's behaviour. It is no accident that the Lay of Finn depicts a tragedy that results from the conflict between kinship ties and heroic obligations that result from peace-weaving[4]. In Adrien Bonjour's words, the Lay's theme is a precarious peace and "how the irresistible force of tribal enmity sooner or later sweeps aside with its imperative all human attempts at a compromise" (Bonjour 1968: 312). The Lay is told as a result of the present events that have taken place in Heorot and as a warning against making intertribal alliances. Another thematic focus of the story is on the costs of the heroic vengeance imperative. This imperative has to be fulfilled at all costs and the story is dialectic of tragic loss and the triumph of loyalty to kinship bonds over exogamic alliances. John Hill claims that the theme that runs through the Finn Lay is the ethnopsychological dynamic of feud contingent upon the bonds of kinship subsuming exogamic obligations.[5] Scott Gwara argues that Hengest mirrors Beowulf and that the minstrel speculates that Hrothgar's new alliance with the newly adopted hero may turn out to be a failure.[6] The story is delivered to Hrothgar because he fails to act appropriately in the role of being a father and the king. Hrothgar, of course, cannot be identified directly with Hengest, who does not function as a

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4 Kemp Malone (1926: 170) in his article on the story of Finn analysed the Lay as a complex tragedy that contrast the passive suffering of Hildeburh with Hengest's unfulfilled desire for revenge. In Malone's reading of the passage, the tragedy, however, is resolved, at least partly: "The death of Finn, then, softens the tragic situation for both Hildeburh and Hengest, and knits together the two tragic themes into a final theme still tragic but not without elements of satisfaction and tranquillity. The feud is over and the Danes are triumphant and at peace. The Frisians are crushed, it is true, but this only pleases the poet and his hearers".

5 In his earlier study, John Hill (1995: 26) claims that in Germanic culture "acts of revenge can be good and jurally definitive", citing the Finn episode and Heathobeard episode from *Beowulf* as evidence and that in the social world of the poem just feuds are distinguished from gratuitous violence and war (Hill 1995: 29-30). He interprets Hildeburh as an active agent rather than passive sufferer, since she "aggressively directs immolation". More than this, he forges a correspondence between Hildeburh and Hrothgar, as "'murder-bale links what Hildeburh sees what Grendel does, with what Hrothgar accordingly feels, and with terrible kin-slaying".

6 Scott Gwara (2008: 137) claims that Hengest mirrors Beowulf and that the story is told to Hrothgar to warn him against his alliance with Beowulf, who like Hengest might prove a procrastinator in an intertribal conflict and that the Lay illustrates the potential disgrace at the hands of a foreign leader.

father in the story. In fact, Hengest's actions make him the opposite of Hrothgar, who unnaturally extends his exogamic obligations, whilst Hengest conforms to the kinship obligations that supersede his sworn loyalties. This contrast, arguably, serves as the political purpose in the telling of the tale after Grendel has been defeated. The Lay, can be seen to expose the absence of any active agency in Hengest.

Hildeburh is the victim of a tragic alliance. The song does indeed elicit pathos and a sense of loss from the audience, as she is "unsynnum" [guiltlessly] (*Beowulf*, l. 1072) bereft of her brother Hnæf and son. The possibility that her son's father is Finn only increases her tragic plight resulting from her entanglement in the net of an unfortunate alliance. "Ne huru Hildeburh herian þorfte / Eotena treowe; unsynnum wearð / beloren leofum æt þam lindplegan / bearnum ond broðrum" [Indeed, Hildeburh had no need to praise the alliance with the Jutes; she was guiltlessly bereft of the dearest ones at a battle-play, her son and brother] (*Beowulf*, ll. 1071-1074). These lines are often taken to be litotes to the effect that Hildeburh found abhorrent the alliance that cost the lives of her son and brother. However, these verses also imply, in a rather literal sense, that Hildeburh is no longer obliged to perform her role of the peace-weaver. Critical appraisals of the episode often assume that the dynamics of its tragedy rely on Hildeburh and Hengest contrasted as, respectively, passive and active agents[7]. Scott Gwara and John M. Hill, however, recognize Hildeburh's active agency in the scheme of vengeance,[8] and although the fragmentary nature of the Lay does not reveal anything about her role in the events prior to the catastrophe of the attack, the statement that Hildeburh is bereft of her family *unsynnum* seems to clear her of any judgment. At no stage of the lay is Hildeburh depicted as mediating between men as is Wealhtheow. Hildeburh is, however, framed by two scenes with Wealhtheow assuming the role of cup-bearer and peace-weaver, whose words have bearing on men's actions.

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7 Martin Camargo (1981: 126-127) sees an ironic contrast between Hildeburh's passive suffering and the inevitability that pushes Hengest to follow the revenge ethics. For Camargo, the episode that follows, Wealhtheow's cup-bearing and her speeches to Hrothgar and Beowulf sets "an ironic distance between her hopes for the future and the bloodshed that every member of her audience knows will follow" (1981: 127). Camargo claims the poet, positing the Finn, Wealhtheow, and Heathobard episodes and forging echoes between them, points to the injustice of male war and feud ethics by exposing women as its helpless victims and defining them as peace-bringers (1981: 127). Since she never speaks, Hildeburh fits Jane Chance's description of the ideal peace-weaver as close-mouthed and passive (Chance 1986: 1). Overing claims that *Beowulf*-poet's insistence on the passivity and vulnerability of the peace-weaver highlights the peace-weaver's "inevitable failure to *be* a peace-weaver" (Overing 1990: 74).

8 Gwara (2008: 135-136) claims that Hengest is implicitly accused of procrastination and that since Hnæf has been killed by treachery Hengest is obliged to obey the sacred duty to avenge his kin. Hildeburh's grief reminds Hengest of his obligation.

The lay of Finn exposes the tragic potential that intertribal alliance involves and tragic conflict that happens in the aftermath of violence. The story shifts to Finn and Hengest and their terms of their new alliance. Finn, suffering from the loss of many retainers, has no means to bring about the complete victory over Hengest and has no other option but to agree to a truce. According to the forced agreement, not only is he to share with the Danes the Frisian throne, but is also obliged to bring it about that his own men and the Danes receive gold and treasure on equal terms. On these conditions, Finn pledges an oath to Hengest.

> Ða hie getruwedon on twa healfa
> fæste frioðuwære Fin Hengeste
> elne unflitme aðum benemde
> þæt he þa wealafe weotena dome
> arum heolde, þæt ðær ænig mon
> *wordum ne worcum* wære ne bræce,
> ne þurh *inwitsearo* æfre gemænden,
> ðeah hie hira beaggyfan banan folgedon
> ðeodenlease, þa him swa geþearfod wæs;
> gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnen spræce
> ðæs morþorhetes myndgiend wære,
> þonne hit sweordes ecg syððan scede.
>
> On both sides, they trusted the firm alliance. Finn swore oaths to Hengest zealously and with no objections to convince him that he would treat the remnant that had escaped the battle unscathed honourably and that no one would break the alliance with either *words or deeds* or complain with cunning words, although they were, for the time being, obliged to follow the slayer of their lord as their new leader as was required from them. If any Frisian happened to be reminded with reckless speech of the murder hate, the edge of sword would settle the issue.
>
> (*Beowulf*, ll. 1095-1106)

The terms of the truce make both sides mindful of the ethics of *words and deeds*. *Inwitsearo* [spiteful cunning] is forbidden and unacceptable even though those under the obligation to follow the ordinance need to accept their lord slayer, Hengest, as their new superior. Here the Lay looks backwards to the Coast-Guard words addressed to Beowulf on the latter's arrival to Hrothgar's kingdom: "Æghwæþres sceal / scearp scyldwiga gescad witan, / worda ond worca, se þe wel þenceð" [a wise shield-warrior who intends well should be able to discern words from works] (*Beowulf*, ll. 287b-289b).[9] Men in the world of *Beowulf* are largely defined through their actions, but they exercise control over themselves and the world around them through language. The ethos of

[9] These lines spoken by the coast-guard have raised a philological controversy. As the editors of the fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* note, "gescad witan" means either 'understand' or 'distinguish' (134-135).

words and works lies at the foundation of the masculinity in *Beowulf* and heroes are supposed to validate their heroic identities by maintaining a correspondence between the words they use and works they perform.

In the Lay, the representation of Hildeburh's silence is related to the masculine language of heroic obligation. At the funeral that follows the battle, Hildeburh gives orders to place her son beside his uncle on the funeral pyre. Her cries and wailing that are reported by the minstrel are the only instance of a "speech" that breaks her silence. For Overing, the reported speech and gestures produced by Hildeburh expose the nonsignification of women in the heroic world (Overing 1990: 82).[10] Although Hildeburh is juxtaposed to Wealhtheow as being a silent and passive victim who falls to the tragic alliance, her behaviour is full of meaningful gestures that mirror the terms of ritual and reflect the heroic ethos. Hildeburh is conspicuously placed after the statement of the truce that involves her brother and Finn. In Germanic and Old Norse literature, women are often blood-thirsty characters eager to urge their men to avenge their wronged kindred (Olsen 1984: 62). The positioning of Hildeburh's lament and Grendel's mother's manly act of avenging her own son is meaningful here; it intimates that Hildeburh might be tempted to transgress the role of the peace-weaver and entice Hengest to violence. In fact, Hildeburh is never described as a peace-weaver. On the contrary, the minstrel contrasts Hildeburh's lack of obligation to honour "*Eotena treowe*" [the truce with Jutes]. Although she may have been given in marriage to Finn to consolidate the terms of the oaths taken as a measure to end an ancient strife, she is presented as a strong and commanding figure when she refuses to perform her role of the peace-weaver.

The minstrel emphasises the conflict of values that causes Hengest's procrastination in fulfilling Hildeburh's desire for revenge. The Lay's resolution is brought about in the fourth movement of the Lay, which focuses on Hengest again. As Malone (1926: 168-169) observes, the minstrel insists on Hengest's reluctance and procrastination and on the fact that Hengest fails to exact revenge.

Ða wæs winter scacen,
fæger foldan bearm. Fundode wrecca,
gist of geardum; he to gyrnwræce
swiðor þohte þonne to sælade,
gif he torngemot þurhteon mihte,
þæt he Eotena bearn inne gemunde –
swa he ne forwyrnde woroldrædenne –

[10] Overing states that "both gestures may seem to associate her with passivity or death; one a kind of acquiescence to the equanimity of its embrace, the other directly ... to the nameless Geatish woman who laments with mournful song ... as the smoke rises from Beowulf's pyre at the end of the poem (Overing 1990: 82).

þonne him Hunlafing hildeleoman,
billa selest, on bearm dyde,
þæs wæron mid Eotenum ecge cuðe.
Swylce ferhðfrecan Fin eft begeat
sweordbealo sliðen æt his selfes ham,
siþðan grimne gripe Guðlaf ond Oslaf
æfter sæsiðe sorge mændon,
ætwiton weana dæl; ne meahte wæfre mod
forhabban in hreþre. Ða wæs heal roden
feonda feorum, swilce Fin slægen,
cyning on corþre, ond seo cwen numen.
Sceotend Scyldinga to scypon feredon
eal ingesteald eorðcyninges,
swylce hie æt Finnes ham findan meahton
sigla searogimma. Hie on sælade
drihtlice wif to Denum feredon,
læddon to leodum.

The winter departed and the bosom of the earth became fair. The exile [Hnæf], the guest in the dwelling, sought to leave the hall. He was pondering on vengeance more keenly than on going back home. Only if he had been able to bring about a violent encounter, which he, son of Jutes, secretly bore in his minds. He did not refuse to consider the worldly remedy, when Hunlafing placed the heirloom, the best of swords, whose edge was well-known among the Jutes, on his lap. Finn, the bold one, became a victim of a sword-play at his own home, when, during a ruthless attack, Guðlaf and Oslaf, after the sea-journey, spoke of affliction and reproached the share of woe. They could not contain their restless hearts in their breasts. The hall was made red with lives of enemies, Finn was killed among his troops and his queen taken. The spearman of the Scyldings carried to ships all household goods of the king that they found at Finn's court. They ferried the noble wife to Denmark.

(*Beowulf*, ll. 1136-1155a)

Hengest harbours the desire to avenge Hnæf throughout the entire winter (the weather and season representing his psychological state) and is reminded of his duty by a retainer who places an ancient heirloom on Hengest's lap. The heirloom presented to Hengest ceremoniously reminds him of the treasure-giving that substantiates the bonds between the lord and his retainer. Scott Gwara uses convincing arguments to demonstrate that Hengest is not a Dane, but a foreign leader, an Angle or Jute, who commands a Danish retinue and, at the same time, is bound by an oath of allegiance to Finn[11]. The Lay is selected by the minstrel, according to

[11] The Venerable Bede associates Hengest with the Jutes in *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum.* The possibility that a party of Jutes is involved in the strife has been caused by a philological controversy over the meaning of *eotenas,* who are mentioned in the Lay. The word *eoten* means giant and Gwara (2008: 163) says the text differentiates between the weak feminine *eote* that stands for the Jute and the strong masculine *eoten* (with *eo-*

Gwara, because "it exemplifies yet again the conflict between the foreign leader (Hengest) and his retinue, a host of Jutes" and because "the essential contrast between Hengest-as-Beowulf and a hypothetical warband rests on the designation of Hengest as a 'wrecca'" (Gwara 2008: 136). Gwara concludes that the minstrel indicates that Beowulf will fail in his allegiance to his own men (Gwara 2008: 136), as Hengest chooses to follow his obligations to Finn and earns a bad reputation for his reluctance to avenge Hnæf (Gwara 2008: 158).

Accordingly, Hildeburh's gestures seem to place emphasis on Hengest's failure to avenge her brother Hnæf. As Jane Chance (1986: 100) suggests, Hildeburh does not mourn her loss of identity as a peace-weaver.[12] Hildeburh is not a failure at peace-weaving, as her actions in that role are only symbolic and provisional in a world in which revenge and feud are inevitable. Her gestures reveal her desire to have both her son and her brother avenged. However, this desire is not satisfied by Hengest, who is not her kin but a foreigner. Subsequently, we can see that the minstrel is building the dramatic tension in the Lay by portraying Hildeburh, as a passive figure, whose desire for revenge cannot be quenched and is being thwarted by Hengest's procrastination. Finn is eventually killed, not by Hengest but by Guðlaf and Oslaf. Guðlaf and Oslaf's killing brings resolution to the tragic conflict. The ending of the Lay draws attention back to Hildeburh, who is now taken back to Denmark with the treasure plundered from Finn's hall. In the central part of the Lay, she commands attention as a vengeful figure but now, silent and passive, she becomes the object of male exchange.[13]

The Lay exposes the inevitability of revenge in the heroic world-view and the superiority of kinship bonds to sworn alliances. Although the alliance between the Danes and the Frisians is sworn for the second time and is depicted as sacred, Hengest stoops to "*inwitsearo*" [spiteful cunning] (*Beowulf*, l. 1101) which is forbidden by the terms of the truce. Hengest and his followers are not condemned for their deceptive actions against Finn as it is only forbidden to betray one's kin. Because of this the most heinous criminal in *Beowulf* is Heremod, who killed his table-companions as well as his relatives. Similarly, Beo-

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tenas as nominative plural) that stands for giant. Gwara rejects the possibility that Jutes are involved, as their killing of Hnæf would absolve Finn from guilt and Finn's death would be gratuitous violence (Gwara 2008: 165). Gwara adopts Kaske's interpretation of *eoten* as Frisian or enemy: "in this context, Hengest's position is tragic as Brodeur alleges. He must choose service to Finn or vengeance for Hnæf regardless of the cost to his personal reputation. Hengest may either break a sworn oath or deny vengeance to his lord" (Gwara 2008: 166).

12 For Chance, Hlldeburh is contrasted with Grendel's Mother. "Like Hildeburh, Grendel's dam will also lose her son and thus her identity as mother. However, she has never had an identity as peace pledge to lose since she was never a wife" (Chance 1986: 100).

13 Overing is right when she compares Hidleburh to Helen of Troy, "whose war is waged 'for her and without her'" (Overing 1990: 87).

wulf scolds Unferth for killing some members of his family and identifies this action as evil and contemptible. In regard to other exogamic relationships, treachery is, of course, not praised. Still, it is invariably implied to be inevitable, as Beowulf himself intimates, when he predicts that the alliance Hrothgar plans to forge between the Danes and the Heathobards will fail on the grounds of the ancient feud between both tribes (*Beowulf*, ll. 2041-2069). However, treachery is acceptable when one wants to deceive his enemy.

Wealhtheow's speech acts that follow the Lay aim to weave the thread of peace at Heorot.[14] According to Shari Horner, "[h]er transformation from a silent cupbearer to a commanding speaking presence is a rewriting of the peace-weaver's role and a disruption of it as well. By reprimanding Hrothgar and abandoning the ceremonial tasks of the peace-weaver, Wealhtheow unsettles (unweaves) the relationship he is attempting to build with Beowulf, even as she works to bind Hrothgar more closely to his own kin" (Horner 2001: 78). Wealhtheow inscribes herself into Danish history through her self-conscious performance as the mother who protects the agnatic line of the Scylding dynasty. Due to this she is textualized as an icon of Hildeburh and her words and gestures point towards and provoke interpretation of the Lay. The audience of the scop's performance, that is Hrothgar, Hrothulf, her sons and Beowulf, face Wealhtheow as an iconic representation of the peace-weaver that mirrors Hildeburh. Her ritualistic speeches and actions mirror and intersect with those in Hildeburh's story. This is exampled after the Lay is finished being sung, when Wealhtheow comes and treats Hrothgar's guests to mead as part of the cup-bearing ritual. In this scene, Hildeburh and Wealhtheow are juxtaposed to one another by the change of pace and rhythm, as the verses announcing Wealhtheow's presence are hypermetric.

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[14] Dockray-Miller views Wealhtheow's actions as performed in an attempt to protect her sons against the violence of the heroic world and her role as mother is to teach and nurture; she is the only successful mother in the poem, as she manipulates the social interaction in the hall with words and generosity (1999: 113). For Overing (1990: 90-91), Wealhtheow's speeches illustrate the movement from violence and inscription on the flesh to inscription in language. She also views Wealhtheow as subjected to double subjugation: "she is manipulated by the same rule of language that she seeks to assert, and as a speaking woman she must use and be used by the language of the masculine economy" (1990: 91). Wealhtheow's hermeneutic act is indeed the vehicle of *difference,* as Overing holds. Wealhtheow's speeches reconfigure and subvert the elements of the Lay as Hildeburh's tragedy, while affirming the reading of the story as the tragedy of heroic obligations. It affirms it necessary to fulfil these obligation. Her interpretation of the story is a critique of the politics of exchange in the heroic world, and yet it is also a peace-weaving speech act reconciling Hrothgar and Hrothulf, whose alliance, as indicated by the narrator, is bound to failure in the future.

Gamen eft astah,
beorhtode bencsweg; byrelas sealdon
win of wunderfatum. Ða cwom Wealhþeo forð
gan under gyldnum beage, þær þa godan twegen
sæton suhtergefæderan; þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere,
æghwylc oðrum trywe. Swylce þær Unferþ þyle
æt fotum sæt frean Scyldinga; gehwylc hiora his ferhþe treowde,
þæt he hæfde mod micel, þeah þe he his magum nære
arfæst æt ecga gelacum.

Joy was renewed, the bench-noise was brighter; the cup-bearers were distributing wondrous cups of wine. Then Wealhtheow came forth. She walked carrying a gold necklace to where the nephew and his uncle were sitting. They were in agreement, each faithful to the other. Such was also Unferth, who was sitting at the feet of the lord of the Scyldings. Each believed in another's' spirit and that he had great courage, although he was not honourable to his kinsmen at sword play.
(*Beowulf*, ll. 1160b-1168a)

Here, Heorot is depicted as the inversion of Finn's hall. Wealhtheow's words and gestures are then used to direct the listeners' (and readers') response to the Lay. The audience at Heorot described prior to Wealhtheow's entrance mirrors the participants of Hnæf's funeral and the dead at the funeral pyre ordered by Hildeburh. In this performance Wealhtheow never oversteps her role as a peace-weaver. She embodies the word-hoard and gold-hoard that cements bonds between men, who create and destroy the world around her. Her self-conscious performance as a peace-weaver refers the assembled audience back to Finn's Lay and the figure of Hildeburh. Iterating Hildeburh and citing from the Lay, she tries to achieve what Hildeburh failed to do as a peace-weaver. Her performance is to affirm the theme of precarious peace and truce that informs the Lay.

The fact that Wealhtheow's speeches are placed after the Lay dramatises the notion of gender as performance that Judith Butler describes near the end of *Gender Trouble.* She claims that the notion that there exists a primary gendered identity is "often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and sexual stylisation of butch/femme identities... [as] in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler 2008: 187).

Parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised and essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalised and mobilised through their parodic recontextualisation. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a

> personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction.
>
> Butler 2008: 188)

The mechanism of parody that Butler proposes for the construction of identities illustrates the textual allegory implicit in the scene. As a diegetic reader, Wealhtheow unveils the poem's textual practices that reduce her self-hood to the reproductive role of the peace-weaver and refuse her any means of constructing her own subjectivity.

The only way to found her own subjectivity as a woman is for Wealhtheow to narrate an act of peace-weaving. Her own role of a cup-bearer and peace-weaver does not only earn her quite an important status in Hrothgar's household but also provides a position from which to exercise language effectively. As an interpreter of the national past, Wealhtheow attempts to effect a change in the world in which she lives by rereading the Lay of Finn. In their peace-weaving capacities, both Hildeburh and Wealhtheow echo the practices of minstrels, whose story-telling is often cast metaphorically as weaving.[15] However, Wealhtheow's interpretation also reflects the poem's textual strategies of representing hierarchies. In her study of textuality of Old English poetry, Carol Braun Pasternack (2006: 21) introduces the notion of the active reader, "who produces the text in a manner analogous to an oral poet who performs a text learned from another performer". Pasternack discards the modern notion of authorship as not applicable to the practices of Anglo-Saxon poets and scribes and replaces the idea of the author with the notion of implied tradition, arguing that in Old English textual practices and manuscript production the roles of the poet, the scribe and the reader overlap (2006: 193). Pasternack demonstrates that medieval readers experienced reading in essentially different terms than modern ones:

> Physical features of the inscribed text make it possible for readers to take possession of the text to a degree not possible for readers of modern printed books. The printed text divides itself from the reader and the world with the initial designation of author's name and text's title, the title designating what follows as a particular, nameable entity and the author's name identifying it with patterns of thought and expression customarily connected with that name. Lacking such a designation and identification, the inscribed text can become the reader's. The absence of an implied author further facilitates the reader's appropriation. In addition, the inscriptions have taken the place of the oral poet's voice and gestures,

[15] In Cynewulf's *Elene*, the narrator compares his poetic activity to weaving, as "*word-crœftum wœf*" [he weaved with word craft] his poetic composition (*Elene*, l. 1237). The quote is taken from Gradon's edition of *Elene* (1958).

> eliminating that physical subjectivity and leaving a yawning gap for readers to colour the words with their own gestures and inflections, introducing their own subjectivity. The reader's voice, then, assumes the role of the poet's.
>
> (Pasternack 2006: 21-22)

Claiming the centre of the stage earlier occupied by the minstrel, Wealhtheow not only becomes the icon of peace-weaving to be looked at but also weaves a new version of the Lay for the characters to interpret. Her performance within the poem then resembles the process of textual composition through manipulation and adaptation of a traditional source. Wealhtheow's diegetic acts of representing can then be seen, arguably, to correspond to Pasternack's notion of the active reader. As an active reader, Wealhtheow allegorises the process of textual inscription, as she weaves herself into the poem's composite structure. She becomes an icon and a rewriting of the text of the Lay, in the version as sung by the minstrel. Metaleptically, she is projected outside the textual boundaries that produce the gender identity she conforms to.

From the position of the foil to Hildeburh, Wealhtheow addresses Hrothgar, and Beowulf. Speaking in her capacity of a peace-weaver, Wealhtheow reminds Hrothgar of his duties to protect his own kin and tries to prevent him from risking new intertribal bonds.

> Onfoh þissum fulle, freodrihten min,
> sinces brytta. Đu 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.
> Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde
> hererinc habban. Heorot is gefælsod,
> beahsele beorhta; bruc þenden þu mote
> manigra medo, ond þinum magum læf
> folc ond rice þonne ðu forð scyle,
> metodsceaft seon. Ic minne can
> glædne Hroþulf, þæt he þa geogoðe wile
> arum healdan gyf þu ær þonne he,
> wine Scildinga worold oflætest;
> wene ic þæt he mid gode gyldan wille
> uncran eaferan gif he þæt eal gemon,
> hwæt wit to willan ond to worðmyndum
> umborwesendum ær arna gefremedon.
>
> Take this cup, my lord, the giver of treasure! Be happy, the gold-friend of men, and speak to the Geat with mild words as one always should. Be gracious to the Geat and mindful of gifts that you possess near and far. I was told that you would like this hero to be your son. Heorot is now cleansed, the bright ring-hall enjoy you rewards as long as you are allowed to and leave [the rule over] the people and

> the kingdom to your kinsmen, when you depart to see your destiny. I believe that my good Hrothulf will treat my sons honourably if you leave the world earlier than him, the friend of Scyldings. I hope that he will repay our sons with goodness, if he remembers what favours we two gave him when he was child.
>
> (*Beowulf*, ll. 1169-1188)

Her speech act carries a rewriting of the *words and works* theme of the Lay. She is instructing Hrothgar to speak to a foreigner "mildum wordum" [with mild words] and addresses him as a treasure-dispenser. The attitude she inculcates in him is juxtaposed with the "inwitsearo" that leads to the resurgence of violence in the Lay. Wealhtheow reminds Hrothgar and other members of his court of their promises; Beowulf, as she points out, has fulfilled his own promise; he has "gefælsod" [cleansed] the hall. Wealhtheow's use of the verb *gefælsian* is significant because the word occurs earlier in the poem when Beowulf and Hrothgar are negotiating the terms of the former's service to the Danish king. Here, Hrothgar's Queen makes manifest that her peace-weaving policies are contingent on the provisional alliances made between her husband, his relatives, and foreign allies.

Before she turns to Beowulf, Wealhtheow reinforces her iconic self-representation as the peace-weaver by becoming the actual reversal of the Lay's tragic female protagonist. In the Lay Hildeburh is objectified and the treasure with which she is carried home is symbolic of her oppression. Hrothgar's Queen, after the Lay has been recited, appears "gan under gyldum beage" [walking under golden necklace] (*Beowulf*, ll. 1163). The jewel that adorns Wealhtheow is an allusion to the treasures in the Lay and reminds of Wealhtheow's own oppression. Now, however, Wealhtheow assumes her husband's capacity of a treasure-giver. The narrator highlights the value of the treasures she endows Beowulf with (*Beowulf*, ll. 1192-1201). The speech to Beowulf that follows the gift-giving is Wealhtheow's statement of the authority she exercises over warriors in Heorot.

> Bruc ðisses beages, Beowulf leofa,
> hyse, mid hæle, ond þisses hrægles neot,
> þeodgestreona, ond geþeoh tela,
> cen þec mid cræfte, ond þyssum cnyhtum wes
> lara liðe. Ic þe þæs lean geman.
> Hafast þu gefered þæt ðe feor ond neah
> ealne wideferhþ weras ehtigað,
> efne swa side swa sæ bebugeð,
> windgeard, weallas. Wes þenden þu lifige,
> æþeling, eadig. Ic þe an tela
> sincgestreona. Beo þu suna minum
> dædum gedefe, dreamhealdende.
> Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe,

> modes milde, mandrihtne hold;
> þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod eal gearo;
> druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde.
>
> Make use of this ring, dear Beowulf, and of this garment, and of this treasure. Prosper well and declare yourself with strength. Be kind with council to these boys. I will remember your rewards. You have brought it about that people will esteem you highly far and wide and for a long time, as far as the sea circumscribes home of the winds. Be blessed, the noble prince, while you live. I wish you the abundance of treasures. Be gentle to my sons and their benefactor. Here every hero is loyal to one another and honest in intention, loyal to their lord. The thegns are loyal, the nation is alert, the retainers drunk with wine act as I desire.
>
> (*Beowulf*, ll. 1216-1231)

In this, she performs a more active role than Horner claims when she says that "she remains fully conventional, and her words and actions seem only to represent Hrothgar's desires" (Horner 2001: 75). Her speech to Beowulf is topped with a promise.[16] She appropriates Hrothgar's role as a treasure-giver, the kingly prerogative to distribute rewards with a view to organising the hierarchical structure of his comitatus and speaks to the hero herself. She also assumes the king's agency in creating bonds between men by appropriating the language of exchange.

Yet her appropriation offers another attempt at the rewriting of the Lay. The necklace she endows Beowulf with symbolises the new bond forged between Beowulf and Hrothgar. The jewel counterpoints the sword used in the Lay to communicate bonds between men. Intratextually, however, it exposes the tragic irony of Heorot's fate. Like the sword laid on Hengest's lap as a symbol that makes the hero bear the memory of the imperative of revenge and is associated with treachery that results from the tragic conflict of values, the necklace alludes the treasure of Finn that is plundered from Frisia and transported with Hildeburh. When Wealhtheow becomes Beowulf's treasure-giver, not only does the scene come to its climax, but it also anticipates the tragic demise of the house of Hrothgar that will be brought about by Freawaru's peace-weaving marriage to Ingeld. This peace-weaving act heightens the irony of fate implicit in the scene, since Heorot is going to be destroyed in the internecine conflict

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[16] In *Language, sign and gender in* Beowulf, Gillian R. Overing, who turns to Searle's theory of speech acts, points out that in the heroic world the making of promises is a linguistic prerogative of men. When Wealhtheow makes a promise to Beowulf, she "is holding up for public attention the linguistic promises that the community has made to itself" (1990: 99). Overing notices that Wealhtheow's language is devoid of promises as '[it] would overstep the poem's bounds of congruity and possibility for a female speaker to commit an essentially non-existent self – one outside the chain of signification – to a course of action" (1990: 95-96).

between Hrothgar and Hrothulf, who now appears to be living in harmony. Interestingly enough, the narrator digresses by alluding to the necklace. Her gift-giving also heightens the irony of female trafficking in *Beowulf*. The promise that she makes to Beowulf, substantialized by the necklace, refers the audience back to the closing section of the Finn's Lay, in which Hildeburh is carried away with treasure back to the homeland.

In fact, far from being a manifestation of Wealhtheow's power, her final speech act exposes her disempowerment. The scene in which Wealhtheow is able to exercise language on equal terms with men and participate in the ritual of gift-giving[17] brings to the foreground the tension between the poem's textual strategies that limit Wealhtheow's subjectivity and her attempt at imposing it on the poem's fabric.[18] Unlike Hildeburh before her, Wealhtheow breaks her silence by trickery. This happens when her husband's heroic speech is on the verge of destabilising the continuance of the Danish dynasty. But because her identity is so determined by her role to weave peace between the men, she manages to do this only once. However, the ironies that undercut her speeches and actions demonstrate that Wealhtheow's peace-weaving, cup-bearing and gift-giving are only bound to produce another net of contradictions resulting in other heroic tragedies. Wealhtheow's speech acts can only provide a provisional solution to the tensions that might undo peace in Heorot by inventing a model for the audience's "reading" of the Lay. Ultimately, in the context of the poem's structure, the necklace refutes the univocality that Wealhtheow tries to impose on it through her interpretative operations; for the audience of the poem, it is a multivalent sign that looks backward to the Lay and forward to the eventual destruction of Heorot through treachery. Wealhtheow ends up representing the symbol of her oppression that points to the provisional nature of her identity as a peace-weaver that is constructed through the operations the masculine heroic code.

As Horner suggests, Wealhtheow's self-expression is short-lived, as her "ability to influence events beyond her enclosure is stopped short by the narrative interven-

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17 In Horner's view, Wealhtheow appropriates the male discourse of power and violence and the fact that she "assumes a masculine guise" makes her similar to Grendel's mother, who in the subsequent narrative segment of the poem avenges her own son, which shows that "the transgression of gender boundaries is one of the most threatening acts in the poem" (Horner 2001: 75). Horner observes that "the display of Grendel's head, of course, follows Beowulf's defeat of Grendel's Mother, who is paired with Wealhtheow in an instructive way" (Horner 2001: 81).

18 Gillian Overing claims that Wealhtheow is doubly subjugated in the poem, as "she is manipulated by the same rule of language that she seeks to assert, and as a speaking woman she must use and be used by the language of masculine economy" (1990: 91). Overing offers a Lacanian reading of the scene, as language represents the Phallocentric law of the Father. For Overing, both Hildeburh and Wealtheow are hysterics, who rebel against the symbolic order (1990: 91).

tion of Grendel's mother" (Horner 2001: 75). Both Overing and Horner are right in their claims that Wealhtheow's speeches bring little change to Heorot's political situation. Wealhtheow's diegetic performance and her self-conscious manoeuvres across different levels of fictionality make manifest the textual conventions that produce the appearance of her gender roles of mother and peace-weaver as facts of nature and as a necessary instrument for the politics of the heroic world. As such, Wealhtheow's words are deconstructive, as they trace the genealogy of gender in the heroic world. Wealhtheow refers to Finn's Lay to lay bare, in Judith Butler's terms, "the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for these acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender" (Butler 2008: 33).

Wealhtheow, of course, is not subversive in the sense that she questions the established order. Her actions, however, are productive in another sense. She succeeds in redefining Hrothgar's masculinity. As she becomes the reader of the Danish past and configures the male members of the Danish royal family around her as her audience and readers of this past as well, she suggests a normative model of masculinity for her husband. Just as Hengest turned out to be less than a man by breaking the sacred sworn bond as a shameful alliance, so too is Hrothgar obliged to respect Hrothulf as his successor rather than Beowulf. Consequently, Wealhtheow brings about her husband's realisation of his masculine obligations.

Beowulf has a complex narrative structure. The technicalities that characterise the poem's composition do not only record the poetic practices of Old English poets. More vitally, the poetic and textual practices that have been the object of the present article testify to cultural practices that constructed the notion of individual in Anglo-Saxon England. A peace-weaver was a cultural construct that embodied the ideal of femininity and queenship in heroic poetry. On the one hand *Beowulf*, it appears, is a critique of the heroic world and unfolds the theme of peace-weaving in conjunction with the theme of political violence. On the other, the poem represents in the context of these larger political themes the question of an individual's role in society and the issue of subject formation in a hierarchically stratified heroic society. The poem's narrative structure, actually, illustrates the process of subject formation and the suppression of individual's self-expression. Wealhtheow's desire to display the necklace she gives to Beowulf is not only the symbol of her husband's alliance with the hero. It also demonstrates that the masculine grammar of power and exchange undoes her attempt at a construction of her own identity. She fails to represent the necklace as univalent because of the foreshadowing of the disasters that loom large over Heorot. Wealhtheow can weave peace by rereading stories and displaying symbols only by means of the semiotic and linguistic constructs available from the masculine heroic ethics of the world she inhabits.

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