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“She had snatched their trophy”: “Lanval,” “Beowulf,” and the Weaver-cum-Warrior

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Peer Review
This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract
How was masculinity defined, and for whom, in medieval English epic? Employing Marie de France’s “Lanval” and the anonymous “Beowulf” as example cases, when examining the social role of gender rather than focus on sexuality as defined by genitalia, these poems flip the script. Wherein titular male-identifying characters swap social responsibilities with female-identifying foils; Beowulf and Lanval become “weaving” humans, while Lanval's lover and Grendel’s Mother take on the “weaponed” roles in order to protect the material existence of their communities. By examining these exchanges, as well as characters that embody the gender role that is expected of them, I argue that early medieval English epic consistently presented a vision of society where a critical part of maintaining healthy communities necessitated the inversion of gender roles.

Keywords
medieval literature, English poetry, Beowulf, Lanval, Marie de France, gender theory, sexuality studies

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Masculine is a term that, today, is typically associated with strength, courage, independence, violence, assertiveness, and the biologically male body. Lanval and Beowulf, the titular heroes of their respective poems, would embody most—if not all—of these traits. To back-project this definition of masculinity onto them, however, would be doing an injustice to the characters and the societal and gender roles they occupied. Rosemary Huisman identifies two genders found in Old English poetry, what she calls the feminine "weaving human" and the masculine "weaponed human" (129). She suggests that each gender role is accompanied by distinct societal functions, "that of weaving . . . for women, and that of possessing weapons for men" (Huisman 130). She goes on to explain that those social functions are characterized by a physical duty and a more important social duty. For the weaving human, the physical duty was actual weaving (clothes, fabric) and the social duty was weaving the social fabric of the group (storytelling, passing down traditions). For the weaponed human, the physical duty was wielding weapons, and the social duty was protecting the social fabric of the group. In this case, the social fabric of a group is defined as the way a group passes down their culture and history and the way that they justify themselves as a distinct group through that history.

Using Marie de France's lai "Lanval," and Seamus Heaney's translation of the English epic "Beowulf," as well as Huisman's definition of medieval gender roles, I argue that Lanval and Beowulf are both feminized hero figures, and that the masculine figures of the poems are Lanval's lover and Grendel's mother. Both poems have inverted these social expectations in order to demonstrate why reversed social and gender roles are required in order to maintain a healthy community. I must also address the large gap of time between the two works. "Lanval" is an Anglo-Norman piece of literature whereas "Beowulf" is Anglo-Saxon. Although gender norms and expectations had shifted by the Anglo-Norman period, I argue that Huisman's definition is still relevant, echoing as it does throughout "Lanval." Huisman's definition of gender—women as weavers, men as weaponed—is especially present for Queen Guinevere and King Arthur, the monarchs of the lai; as monarchs, they provide the ideal example of gender performance.

Lanval and Queen Guinevere: A Tale as Old as Time

"Lanval," by Marie de France, presents the conventional gender roles in their traditional forms as dangerous. I define "traditional gender roles" as women who perform as feminine, and men who perform as masculine. In this poem, the main weaving human identifies as female, and the weaponed humans identify as male. In particular, Queen Guinevere is the ultimate example of a weaving human, demonstrating how dangerous weaving humans can be. When Lanval rejects her advances, Guinevere becomes irate and seeks revenge,

> Great was her grief, rage, wounded pride,
> she was so shamed and vilified.
> Wretched at heart, she went to bed,
> never would she get up, she said,
> until the king had got redress
> for that which caused her such distress. (de France, ll. 305–10)

Guinevere lies about what actually happened, and weaves a completely different tale for Arthur. Guinevere wanted "redress" (in this context, revenge) from the King for Lanval rejecting her and she knew the best way to get it would be to lie. She was "wretched at heart" so she knew it was evil, but she did it anyway because she knew she was wrong and lying was the only way to get "redress."

As previously mentioned, the main social role of the weaponed human is to protect the social fabric that the weaving human creates. In this moment of the poem, Queen Guinevere (the weaving human) is crafting a tale that will define how both she and Lanval are perceived. If Guinevere had told the truth, everyone would know how she was "shamed and vilified" by his rejection. Instead, she turns

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the tables and tells Arthur how "She had refused him, loyally; he had humiliated her" (de France ll. 318–19). After hearing this, Arthur "swore an oath, / if in the court this was proved truth, / Lanval must hang or burn to death" (de France ll. 326–28). Guinevere takes advantage of a system where the weaving humans (typically feminine) tell the stories and the weaponed humans (typically masculine) protect those stories, and she uses it for her own benefit. She knows that, as a weaponed human, King Arthur would want to protect her reputation, so she manipulates the system in such a way that allows her to appear innocent, and Lanval guilty. Lanval must rely on the quality and ethos of the story he tells and in this way, he becomes a weaving human. According to Jane Chance, over the course of the poem, "Lanval is . . . disgendered, feminized, and then silenced into complete alterity and nonbeing before his transportation . . . to the Other World" (47). In other words, Lanval's increased feminization becomes a problem to the point where he can no longer exist in the human world of traditional gender norms and roles.

Lanval's lover also subverts traditional gender roles, fulfilling the masculine role of the weaponed human in the exact same way King Arthur does, by protecting the weaving human—in this case, Lanval's—reputation. After the trial, it is presumed that Lanval will be found guilty until at the last moment: the fairie lady arrives and declares, "Lanval must not be here abused / for what he spoke; thou, King, must know / the queen was wrong; it was not so" (de France ll. 618–20). Although she does not have any literal weapons, Lanval's lover executes the social duties that accompany the weaponed human by appearing in front of the court and telling everyone present that what Guinevere said, "was not so" (de France l. 620). After Lanval's lover comes to court, Lanval leaves and "with her he went to Avalon" (de France l. 641). Lanval leaving the ordinary world and going with his lover to Avalon is the ultimate indication that the system is broken. Lanval is a knight known for his loyalty, having "served [Arthur] well." For him to just leave means that the current system is malfunctioning, especially when he leaves for Avalon. This implies that a paradise, a place better than the "real" world, is somewhere that traditional gender roles are inverted.

Beowulf and Grendel's Mother: Switching Sides

In a surprising reversal of medieval gender norms, like Lanval it is Beowulf who fulfills the feminine duty of weaving together a social fabric for himself and his group of men in addition to wielding weapons (although not winning by them). Before Beowulf's arrival, King Hrothgar's adherents provide an excellent example of the danger of traditional gender roles. After Beowulf volunteers to take on Grendel, Hrothgar explains what happened to the men who had taken on the same task:

> Time and again, when the goblets passed
> and seasoned fighters got flushed with beer
> they would pledge themselves to protect Heorot
> and wait for Grendel with whetted swords.
> But when dawn broke and day crept in
> over each empty, blood-spattered bench,
> the floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted
> would be slick with slaughter. And so they died,
> faithful retainers, and my following dwindled (Heaney ll. 480–88)

While these "fighters" precisely performed the weaponed role expected of them, right down to their "[sharpened] swords," Grendel's challengers were never successful, as evidenced by the "blood-spattered bench" and the mead-hall "slick with slaughter." These men died gruesome deaths performing the role that was expected of their gender and it not only resulted in their deaths, it also impacted Hrothgar's community. As his "faithful retainers" perished, his "following dwindled," a consequence that is worsened because the slaughter of his followers was not a singular event—it

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happened "time and time again." Presumably, over the "twelve winters" that Grendel terrorized Heorot (Heaney l. 147). The yearly slaughter of Hrothgar's men is a significant loss to his following, one that thoroughly explores the consequences of the singularly focused "weaponed-human" and continually emphasizes the danger of traditional gender roles to a community.

It is not until Beowulf "renounce[s his] / sword" that Grendel finally falls (Heaney l. 436–37). By choosing to not use his sword, Beowulf is rejecting his masculinity. If the sword is a symbol for the phallus, as argued by Rachel Savini in this special issue, he is rejecting it in more ways than one: he is throwing away his weapon, the instrument that makes him a weaponed-human, the Anglo-Saxon "masculine." Not only does Beowulf reject his masculinity, but there are several instances in the text where Beowulf embodies the feminine weaving-human by building his own myth through storytelling. The first occurrence is when Beowulf is flyting with Unferth about his swimming match with Breca. He says, "The truth is this: / when the going was heavy in those high waves, / I was the strongest swimmer of all" (Heaney ll. 532–34) before he tells his tale of fighting through ocean waves and slaying sea-monsters. Beowulf starts off his claim that he was, in fact, the better swimmer by saying "The truth is this," which is an unreliable statement because in actuality there was no one else there to verify this. Beowulf was alone fighting the sea monsters, so there is no way of knowing if what he is saying is actually true. In this instance, he is weaving a tale that influences people's perceptions of him. This kind of formal boast creates an impression of power and strength that might be illusory.

Another instance of Beowulf weaving his own myth is after he returns home to Geatland. When he is telling his story to Hygelac, Beowulf says, "It would take too long to tell how I repaid / the terror of the land for every life he took" (Heaney ll. 2093–94). He then goes on to describe, in great detail, the rewards he got for slaying Grendel and the "singing and excitement" that followed (Heaney l. 2105). Beowulf's pronoun choice of "I" when he is talking about killing Grendel subtly gives himself all the credit. While it's true that he did a lot of the work, he was certainly not alone in Heorot as "time and again, / Beowulf's warriors worked to defend / their Lord's life" (Heaney ll. 793–94). Beowulf's dismissal of his men makes it seem that he and he alone defeated Grendel, which makes Beowulf appear all the more powerful. Additionally, by discussing the celebrations that followed Grendel's defeat more than the defeat itself, Beowulf is emphasizing his heroism.

Weaving tales about his heroics is how Beowulf makes himself stand-out. Without a means of building his own status, he would be nowhere, for

> He had been poorly regarded
> for a long time, was taken by the Geats
> for less than he was worth . . .
> They firmly believed that he lacked force,
> that the prince was a weakling; but presently
> every affront to his deserving was reserved (Heaney ll. 2183–89)

Before he told stories about himself, he was "poorly regarded" and seen as weak; the Geats change their minds when Beowulf tells stories of his great deeds. Beowulf "kept thinking about / his name and fame," but in order to do so, he appropriates a key feature of female identity and power (Heaney ll. 1529–30). The biggest role of the weaving human is to, through story, give a specific tribe a sense of unique identity and sense of value. By articulating the distinction of the group, and by passing down stories and the culture of the group, the people are more likely to defend one another and sustain the tribe. Beowulf appropriates this technique of psychological communal bonding and instead uses it to distinguish himself as a hero—turning a communal technique into one that privileges an individual.

Beowulf is not the only character in this poem who performs a different gender, however. While Grendel's mother identifies as female and maternal, she performs as masculine when she is forced to protect her dying social group and its distinctiveness. While it is possible that Grendel's mother was solely seeking revenge for the slaughter of her son when she attacked Heorot, there is

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evidence that she was equally driven by her need to protect what was left of her community. Grendel's mother "headed for the fen" right after she "had taken one of the retainers" which indicates a sense of self-preservation on her part (Heaney ll. 1294–95). Had she only been after revenge, she most likely would have killed as many half-Danes as possible, however, she quickly left before anybody had time to react and harm her which suggests that she cares whether she lives or dies. Because she is the only one remaining in her community, her instinct for self-preservation is simultaneously preservation of her community.

After Grendel dies, his mother is the only one left in their group, so she tries to protect her distinctiveness by committing violence against Hrothgar, which attributes to her the otherwise understood masculine traits of a weaponed human. When Grendel's mother first attacks, she does so swiftly, and only kills one man, a specific target, before scampering back to her "outlandish lair" (Heaney l. 1500). When Grendel's mother attacks Heorot "She had snatched their trophy, / Grendel's bloodied hand" along with Aeschere, Hrothgar's "highest-placed advisor, / his dearest companion" (Heaney ll. 1303–34, 1309–10). She takes back the piece of her son that Beowulf kept as a trophy to keep her group together. Not only is the lair described as "hellish" and terrifying, but the journey to get there is horrifying as well: "The forest paths / were marked all over with the monster's tracks" and

> The water was infested
> with all kinds of reptiles.
> There were writhing sea-dragons
> and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
> serpents and wild things such as those that often
> surface at dawn to roam the sail-road / and doom the voyage (Heaney ll. 1403–30)

In making Beowulf come to her, Grendel's mother forces him to see the horrors surrounding her which serves to underscore her distinction as a monster and not a human. She is protecting her social group by reminding Beowulf and his group of hunters that she is a monster. When Grendel dies, she was left as the last of her kind, so by reminding humans that she is a great and terrible monster, she is protecting her group's history and social fabric—the role of a masculine, weaponed human.

In a more literal sense, Grendel's mother is a weaponed human because she wields her "savage talons" (Heaney l. 1504). Her talons serve as her weapon, as her way of destroying Beowulf and protecting her group from extinction. The fact that she is a weaponed human makes her all the more terrifying because she is still undeniably female. She is a mother, she gave birth, and yet she is still, in a subversion of traditional gender roles, weaponed. As Renee Trilling argues, "it is, finally, the very indeterminacy of Grendel's mother, as a very material female avenger, that makes her so threatening to the Danes, and the varying layers of ambiguity—monster or human, woman or warrior—add up to a proportionally more dangerous creature" (10). When Beowulf and Grendel's Mother finally meet in battle, Beowulf comes prepared with a sword that "had never failed / the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle" (Heaney ll. 1460–61). When he tries to use it, however, "it spared her and failed / the man in his need" (Heaney ll. 1524–25). As I previously established, Beowulf is a weaving human, so when he tries to wield a weapon, he fails. It is only after "he flung his sword away" and realizes that "he would have to rely on the might of his arm" that he finds some success (Heaney l. 1531–34).

A weaving human uses their bare hands to fulfill the physical function of their role, which is exactly what Beowulf does to defeat both Grendel and his mother. Eventually, Beowulf finds success with a sword, but it is not his. It is Grendel's Mother's "ancient heirloom / from the days of the giants" (Heaney ll. 1558–59). Beowulf is able to successfully wield this sword because when he takes it from Grendel's Mother, he appropriates her masculinity. He is able to wield a weapon, and she can no longer protect her social distinctiveness. When Beowulf steals Grendel's Mother's sword, he strips her of her masculinity and takes it for himself. It is only then that Beowulf succeeds, and Grendel's

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Mother fails. Grendel's Mother failed because she was, at the moment, a weaving human unable to protect her community, and as a result, her group became extinct.

The sword also represents the failure of Grendel's Mother at her social role. After Beowulf defeats her, the sword's "blade had melted / and the scrollwork on it burned, so scalding was the blood / of the poisonous fiend who had perished there" (Heaney ll. 1615–17). The sword's scrollwork was a symbol of the social fabric that Grendel's mother was trying to protect, so when she ultimately failed, it was erased with her. The blade "bloated and it burned / in their rushing blood," which suggests that when Grendel's Mother, the last member of her social group perished, the culture and history that she was trying to protect vanished with her (Heaney ll. 1667–68). Although the hilt survived, the blade was destroyed—that is, the piece of the sword that represented masculinity in both its function as a weapon as well as its physical appearance as a symbol of the phallus. Even partial destruction of such a significant object, one that has a community etched into it, represents the destruction of said community. The sword cannot function as a weapon without its blade, and so the community is left broken. Further, the blade didn't just disappear, it "burned in their rushing blood." Their own blood vanished the blade, suggesting that if their blood hadn't been spilled, the blade wouldn't have been erased.

Conclusion

The inversion of traditional gender roles in both of these works and my ensuing analysis contributes to the critical conversation surrounding gender performativity in the Middle Ages. Huisman identifies two main gender roles, the weaponed human, which would typically be associated with men and the weaving human, which would typically be associated with women. Both "Lanval" and "Beowulf," however, demonstrate how traditional gender roles are dangerous and often result in failure, and how inverted gender roles and social duties ultimately lead to success and survival in the literature of these communities. Over the course of "Lanval," the male figure slowly turns into a weaving human as he tries to save his reputation, to the point where he became so feminized that he could no longer exist in the "real" world, so he went to Avalon—literally paradise— with his masculine lover.

Beowulf embodied the traits of a weaving human in several instances, most notably when he weaved his own myth and created his own legend. Not only that but in terms of battle, Beowulf only succeeded as a hero when he performed the feminine (weaving human) gender or appropriated masculinity. Alternatively, Grendel's mother succeeded the most when she embodied the weapon human, and she only failed when she was forced into the role of a weaving human. As a consequence of losing her masculinity, Grendel's Mother loses her ability to protect her social group and that group disappears forever, which also could be an analysis of the Middle Ages. If one group (the weaving humans, or the weaponed humans) were to die out, it would leave the other group completely vulnerable and susceptible to extinction. Both poems suggest that the inversion of gender and social roles are a good thing, for the individual as well as the larger community they aim to preserve, in the Middle Ages, and today.

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