

Powerful Words: Wealhtheow's Use of Imperatives in *Beowulf*

Kat Kolby

ABSTRACT

How powerful were the women in Old English poetry, particularly in the well-known poem *Beowulf*? There are few female characters within the poem, and only one of them has a speaking role. Wealhtheow, queen of the Scyldings, is a peace-weaving wife to Hrothgar, one of the primary characters alongside Beowulf. Discussions of the specifics of her role as peace-weaver between her home nation and that of Hrothgar are mired in gender role assumptions on the parts of critics throughout the ages. Some have viewed this title as one denoting property: Wealhtheow is traded to Hrothgar as a gift to create peace between nations. Others acknowledge that peace-weaving is more of an active position, wherein Wealhtheow is a diplomat between nations, weaving peace herself. I argue that her power as a leader is best exemplified by her use of the imperative case. By examining the frequency of this case and the choice of imperative verbs within Wealhtheow's speeches, I demonstrate that she issues commands more often than any other speaker, often with long-standing expectations on those to whom she speaks.

Beowulf contains few female characters, only one of which has a speaking role. Much debate has circulated as to just how powerful these characters are, yet there is little examination of their issuing of commands. Wealhtheow is the only woman with readable speech acts in the poem. After first encountering her character and reading her speeches, I was left wondering just how much sway this *freoðuwebbe*¹ wielded. Wealhtheow is the queen of the Scyldings (clan of Danes) and wife to Hrothgar, and I argue that she is one of, if not the most, practically and politically powerful characters in the poem by way of her use of imperatives in comparison with any other character's use in a speech act. Prior to my analysis, however, one must consider how some of our current misconceptions regarding the gender roles within the poem were constructed—primarily how certain source materials may have influenced perceptions of the female roles therein. Outside of our own cultural assumptions projected upon the poem, many of us were first introduced to *Beowulf* in high school, if at all, and this is where some of our gendered misconceptions probably began regarding the roles of women in the poem. If not high school, then we were most likely introduced to the poem through Klaeber's renowned edition of the text—one in which Wealhtheow has been glossed as a mothering, nurturing figure rather than one of power.

Wealhtheow's words can lose some of their impact and intensity during the translation process, with some of the choices on the part of the translator falling back on gendered connotations for terms with far broader scopes of meaning. Josephine Bloomfield writes about understanding the "social, familial, and political roles of the aristocratic Anglo-Saxon woman" from a reading of Wealhtheow and how Klaeber's glossing of certain words consistently as "kind" or "kindness" "transformed [her] from peace weaver and power broker to tender maternal care giver:" her speeches become lessened and "altered by this series of uniform glosses to emphasize personal affection over tribal necessity."² Bloomfield argues that, because of Klaeber's upbringing and the roles of women in Germany throughout his life, his "glosses seem potentially to reflect not Old English polysemy but the biases of his culture."³ There are five words that the poet uses both in the descriptions of the queen and within her speeches that all could have alternate translations that Klaeber consistently glosses, and only in the occasions connected to the

1. Peace-weaver. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2. John P. Bloomfield, "Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of Wealhtheow," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93, no. 2 (January 1, 1994), 184.

3. Bloomfield, "Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of Wealhtheow," 185.

queen, as “kind” or “kindness.”⁴

Bloomfield makes a series of excellent points regarding all five terms (*milde*, *glæd*, *freondlāpu*, *liðe*, and *gedefe*) and how each gloss of the term should align with Wealhtheow’s ability to call for action and make her political moves as peace weaver among her king and Beowulf rather than implore them to be kind: “her concern is not with gentle interpersonal behavior but with the reins and passage of power and the treachery possible in such passage.”⁵ It is Bloomfield’s opinion, and my own, that she does not demonstrate “motherly kindness,” but instead “the penetrating rationality and practicality with which she vigilantly ‘weaves peace’ for her tribe.”⁶ Much like we may fall prey to viewing women in Old English poetry through a modern lens, Klaeber seems to have simplified Wealhtheow by way of confirmation bias and has reduced her to his concept of woman rather than representing her how she is within the context of the piece or would have been historically.

If, however, one was introduced to *Beowulf* in high school, Daniel F. Pigg’s article, “Rethinking Masculinity Studies in the Curriculum: So What Do We Do about *Beowulf*?” outlines how one of the most available abridged versions of the poem, often found in textbooks, “distorts that understanding with respect to the status of masculinity, and thus, thwarts the forms of reflective gender representation both inside and outside the text.”⁷ It does this by representing “masculinity without question...a very unmedieval position as we now understand it.”⁸ This is because “no high school anthologies have ever included” scenes regarding Beowulf’s “own controlling of his temper and diplomatic posturing, the warrior Beowulf’s contact with Queen Wealhtheow, and the warnings of Hrothgar about the growth of pride that becomes destructive.”⁹ These are all scenes that highlight not only the warnings for a purely aggressive-masculinist mentality in the hero but also establish power that Wealhtheow wields over her male counterparts. The lack of introduction to these key scenes could also be a source for our understanding of how women interact within the text or should be viewed in cultural context of the poem—there is no basis to make judgments if there is no source material to analyze.

Of specific interest to me is Pigg’s exploration of Wealhtheow’s interactions with

4. Ibid, 184.

5. Ibid, 195.

6. Ibid, 196.

7. Daniel F. Pigg, “Rethinking Masculinity Studies in the Curriculum: So What Do We Do about *Beowulf*,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 21, no. 4 (December 22, 2005), 13.

8. Pigg, “Rethinking Masculinity Studies in the Curriculum: So What Do We Do about *Beowulf*,” 13.

9. Ibid, 14.

the protagonist. In his section concerning the queen, Pigg immediately acknowledges that the “role of women in *Beowulf* is an important one that many viewers fail to recognize on first acquaintance” and that “the female voice is also significant in critiquing male behavior.”¹⁰ The queen’s voice is of particular interest—not just for its ability to critique but also for its ability to enact change. Wealhtheow, according to Pigg and many other scholars, “was a skillful diplomat, preventing her husband Hrothgar from making a fatal mistake.”¹¹ This mistake refers to Hrothgar’s wanting to leave his kingdom to Beowulf instead of his own sons or nephew after Beowulf successfully defeats Grendel in battle. Without students engaging with these sections, they would be unable to understand the political power wielded by Wealhtheow in this passage.

The issue with Pigg’s discussion comes later, wherein he uses the word “warning” to describe Wealhtheow’s speech to her husband.¹² This, alongside other scholars’ readings of her speeches as warning, reminding, urging, or imploring rather than directing,¹³ renders the queen as less powerful than she is—even reduces her to a gendered stereotype of all talk and no action. The talk is the action, and language regarding Wealhtheow “suggesting” action on the part of others is inaccurate. Further and more extreme, the women characters of *Beowulf* “have been customarily looked upon as passive figures, shadows in an otherwise brilliantly illuminated heroic world... Wealhtheow is the ‘tragic queen,’ caught in the net of male political intrigue.”¹⁴ Wealhtheow is not “caught” in the net, she is weaving it herself through her continuous commands given in her speeches. Another gendered stereotype to be dismissed is that of the peace-weaver as an object or possession of her king. Often, these accounts consider peace-weaving to be the singular act of exchanging the bride rather than the continuous actions of the bride in their subsequent marriage.

10. Ibid, 16.

11. Ibid, 16.

12. Ibid, 17.

13. For more examples of this kind of language concerning Wealhtheow’s speeches, see Carol P. Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges,” *Women in German Yearbook* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2004), 13–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.2004.0012>; Victoria Wodzack, “Of Weavers and Warriors: Peace and Destruction in the Epic Tradition,” *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 39, no. 3 (March 1, 1998), 253–62, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2003531999&site=eds-live&scope=site>; and Jacek Olesiejko, “Wealhtheow’s Peace-Weaving: Diegesis and Genealogy of Gender in *Beowulf*,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2014), 103–23, <https://doi.org/10.2478/stap-2014-0005>.

14. Helen Damico, Olsen Alexandra Hennessey, and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

In his brief article concerning a legal connection to the name *Wealththeow*, Nathan A. Breen discusses how the queen could be named after a “legally defined group of people who, while not natives, existed in the kingdom and had certain limited legal rights” or ‘*ðeowwealh*.’¹⁵ These were essentially slave-like people, and Breen does note the possible irony in its transformation into the name of the commonly described as a “free” queen. This concept of ownership of her person, however, is common among scholars. Christopher Fee, in discussing the similarities between treasure giving and the exchange of a peace-weaving bride, essentially likens peace-weavers to the golden artifacts bequeathed to thanes as social transactions. Fee states that women in these roles are objects “used to affect social cohesion.”¹⁶

While there were many examples of those considering peace-weaving as an act among nations rather than the actions of the bride in question, opinions have since shifted.¹⁷ In 2021, Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling wrote about the issues of peace-weavers and how the “current consensus, led by scholars such as Sklute and Cavell, is that peace-weaving as a term refers to a practice—the active fostering of peace through diplomacy—and not to a category of women.”¹⁸ Throughout their article, they dismiss much of the projection of modernized sexism onto these characters of medieval texts and situate peace-weaving as an act that requires intense emotional fortitude and active political involvement. These women are meant to appease the group they are married into, to weave peace with them by making them happier and more amenable towards the family from which the peace-weaver hails, and to learn to dismiss any anger that they may have been harboring for, presumably, previous foes. Despite the possible sadness or resentment these women may have towards their situation, peace-weaving wives must control and overcome these emotions if they are to be effective in their role. Furthermore, their involvement in the court, by exchanging gifts and participating in courtly rituals, places them in league with their kings as performers of the same rites with the same

15. Nathan A. Breen, “*Beowulf*’s *Wealththeow* and the *ðeowwealh*: A Legal Source for the Queen’s Name,” *American Notes & Queries—a Quarterly Journal of Short Articles Notes and Reviews* 22, no. 2 (April 1, 2009), 2, <https://doi.org/10.3200/anqq.22.2.2-4>.

16. Christopher Fee, “‘*Beag & Beagroden*’: Women, Treasure and the Language of Social Structure in ‘*Beowulf*,’” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 97, no. 3 (1996), 287, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43346397>.

17. For other empowering interpretations of *Wealththeow* and updated views on the women of Old English literature, see also: Damico, Hennessey, and Olsen, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*.

18. Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling, “*Modthryth* and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England,” *English Studies* 102, no. 6 (August 18, 2021), 638, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838x.2021.1966966>.

privileges.

Another major counter to views like those of Fee who liken rings to women who are gold-adorned is Helen Damico's *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. A must read for anyone looking deeper into Wealhtheow, Damico draws attention to the similarities between a woman who is gold-adorned or adorned with rings as one who could be wearing armor or dressed for battle. While much of the book is dedicated to Damico's careful study of similarities between Wealhtheow and other heroic women of Valkyrie legend, it is important for my purposes to point out that Damico would agree with me that Wealhtheow's "mode of expression is the imperative...that lends assertiveness to the queen."¹⁹ Jacek Olesiejko also points out the significance of Wealhtheow's place as the "only female speaker in *Beowulf*," which suggests that she has a "privileged position" in the text.²⁰ My issue with this analysis comes when these speeches are described as using "masculine language," rather than affording the character with the power of her own speech. I also disagree with Olesiejko's insistence that Wealhtheow is merely a manifestation or "icon" of peace-weaving rather than a standalone character to be examined for her innate value as a complete person.²¹ Clearly, some cultural assumptions regarding women are at play in this work as well.

Olesiejko also uses words like "requests" and "questions" to describe Wealhtheow's speech acts, and these, like those previously mentioned, reduce the queen's speech to one of mere words rather than directives that call for immediate action.²² In her article "Speaking of Nostalgia in *Beowulf*," Mary Catherine Davidson legitimizes Wealhtheow's speeches as being unconventionally and uniquely heroic in their use, also due to the use of imperatives.²³ It is this use that primarily interests me and marks Wealhtheow as particularly powerful. Importantly, the "imperative is used exclusively in the second person and marks directives."²⁴ Tanja Rütten points out that the imperative usually shows up more often in reports of speech acts rather than direct speech acts, or that the use of imperatives shows up far more often when we are being told what

19. Helen Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, 8.

20. Olesiejko, "Wealhtheow's Peace-Weaving: Diegesis and Genealogy of Gender in *Beowulf*," 103.

21. *Ibid*, 104.

22. *Ibid*, 104.

23. Mary Catherine Davidson, "Speaking of Nostalgia in *Beowulf*," *Modern Philology*, November 1, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1086/506533>, 150.

24. Tanja Rütten, "Speech, Texts, and Choices from the Modal System: Mood Distribution in Old English Sermons," *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016), 190.

someone said to someone else rather than in reproductions of speeches given. Importantly, Rütten's study deals with sermons and other religious texts, so the usage of imperatives would denote when the people being addressed are directly told to do things in a spiritual sense—something with dire importance in the cultural context of Old English poetry. While the subject matter of this study is not quite applicable to my own, the idea that imperatives are both directives and are most often found in the narrative function of a reported speech act would mark Wealhtheow's speeches as interestingly unique within *Beowulf*.

I began looking at Wealhtheow's speeches as unique when I first counted the number of imperatives that I saw in them and wondered if she had used them significantly more often than her male counterparts—most specifically Hrothgar, her husband, and the protagonist Beowulf. I then began counting imperatives in every speech act within the poem to see if my theory was correct. Also of importance were the kinds of imperatives used within each speech—were these characters telling others to have a seat or telling them to be or exist a certain way? In what contexts? These kinds of directives carry different weights of power—as telling someone to sit down is a singular act while telling someone to *be* something is an order in perpetuity. It is interesting to see who is using these verbs as imperatives and how often it is done.

I charted and calculated the density of each character's use of imperatives per line of speech. I included interjections in my count of imperatives because of their variability and possibility of existing as a directive (i.e., "listen" or "let us" for *hwæt* or *uton/wutun*). The following table tracks my findings from every speaker in the poem—including the unnamed coastguard, the last survivor, and the messenger found at the end. The first column lists who is speaking, the second column gives the total number of lines of speech from the speaker in the entire poem, the third column lists how many words were in the imperative, the fourth column lists how many of these imperatives were conjugations of the words *beon* or *wesan*,²⁵ while the final, fifth column calculates the density of imperatives used on average per line of speech. The speakers are given in the order they appear in the text. All names have been modernized. I have placed Wealhtheow's line in bold, as its results are, without a doubt, the most surprising and important for the purposes of this paper.

25. Most often: To be, exist, become (According to Bosworth-Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online, <https://bosworthtoller.com/>)

Speaker	Line Count	# Imperatives	# <i>beon/wesan</i>	Density/line
Coastguard	38.5	2	0	0.0519
Beowulf	584.5	17	4	0.0291
Wulfgar	31	2	0	0.0645
Hrothgar	258.5	20	1	0.0774
Unferth	23	0	0	0
Wealhtheow	35	14	5	0.4
Hygelac	12	0	0	0
Last Survivor	20	2	0	0.1
Wiglaf	95	3	0	0.0316
Messenger	128	0	0	0

Table 1: Calculating the density of imperatives in speakers in *Beowulf*

Despite my inclusion of interjections, none of which are from Wealhtheow, she has the highest density of imperative use by far. She is seconded by the last survivor, whose imperatives do not have a particular recipient (one of which is directed at the earth itself), while third goes to Hrothgar who has a speech commonly referred to as a sermon—yet she still has more directives than he. Not only this, but she also has the highest use of *beon/wesan* as an imperative. This alone is impressive, but when considering that she only has thirty-five lines of speech, this becomes significant. The poet, often viewed as highly formulaic and a brilliant artist capable of intense subtlety, has laden her speeches with this mode of speaking and has done so for a purpose. While I cannot be certain due to the unprovable authorial assumptions involved, the purpose must at the very least be to showcase Wealhtheow's ability to issue directives to her king and those in her court. An examination of the speeches in question is worthwhile to consider which kinds of orders she is giving and to whom. Both speeches follow Beowulf's successful wrenching off Grendel's arm and assumed ending of the hall's horrible predicament (i.e., prior to the attack from Grendel's mother).

The first speech, on lines 1169-1187,²⁶ is directed at Hrothgar and contains six of her fourteen imperatives: *onfoh*, *wes*, *spraec*, *beo*, *bruc*, and *laef*. Wealhtheow is telling Hrothgar what to do with four of these: *onfoh þissum fulle*,²⁷ *ond to Geatum spræc*

26. For this and all Old English text of *Beowulf*, I will use R. D. Fulk et al., *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 2008.

27. Take/receive/accept this cup.

mildum wordum,²⁸ *bruc þenden þu mote manigra medo*,²⁹ and *ond þinum magun læf folc ond rice*.³⁰ The first of these is fulfilling the ceremonial goings-on in the hall, as she has just presented him first with the cup. The second is telling him how to act with his guests, most specifically *swa sceal man don*.³¹ The third is providing advice and counsel on how to receive the boons of this victory with an obvious notion that it might be short-lived, while the final imperative is the most crucial to Wealhtheow's responsibilities as queen. She is directing Hrothgar's succession and telling him to leave his lands and people to the hands of his own kinsmen. This is not a request, nor is it a warning as many have described. This is a directive—a command—on how to handle his kingdom moving forward, and it is following Hrothgar's giving Beowulf family heirlooms and great riches and the Lay of Finn has been sung.

Wealhtheow fears that Hrothgar will leave Denmark to his champion and forget the consequences of poor political movements that were just illuminated in one of their favorite songs. She is, essentially, determining the future of Denmark—be that for the good or bad given the later events for the nation—which places a considerable amount of power at her feet. These imperatives deal with the hall and the future of her kingdom, while the others deal with Wealhtheow giving out directives on how Hrothgar should be as a man and a king. She first tells him *þu on sælum wes*,³² which denotes again how he should react to the joyous news of Grendel's defeat. After explaining how to speak to the Geats, she also advises him (and endorses his previous giving behavior) to *beo wið Geatas glæd, geofena gemyndig*.³³ These imperatives all sound akin to maxims on how to act and be a good king and, coming from a woman, they seem out of place to a modern audience. However, Wealhtheow is her king's chief advisor and partner in this speech and is, just as much if not more than Hrothgar himself, determining how the king should behave and rule moving forward. This is a queen running her kingdom in real time through speech.

The second speech on lines 1216-1231 is directed at Beowulf and contains the remaining eight imperatives: *bruc, neot, þeo, geþeoh, cen, wes, wes, and beo*. This speech also contains the most important line—her closing one. It is important to note that this speech is separated into the first section concerning what Beowulf should do and the second section concerning how he should be. This shift in type of imperative amplifies the speech over time, showing Wealhtheow's power over her guest growing as she continues

28. And to the Geats speak with mild words.

29. Enjoy, while you can, your many rewards.

30. And to your kinsmen leave folk and kingdom.

31. As a man should do.

32. Be thou in happiness.

33. Be with the Geats gracious, mindful of gift-giving.

to speak. It is also significant that she is speaking this way to the very champion that the entire hall is celebrating—the man who just came to rid her kingdom of its longest standing tragedy—and yet she still has commands, as well as her own gifts, to give him. In giving her gifts, she tells him to make use of (*bruc, neot*) a fabled necklace and mail coat, essentially emboldening her gift-giving with imperatives that highlight their usefulness. She also tells him to succeed and prosper (*þeo, geþeoh*) in another bout of well-wishing or what could be seen as a royal endorsement for his future. In telling him how to behave, she directs him to *cen þec mid cræfte*.³⁴ *Cræfte* here could mean strength, as he has just defeated Grendel by means of his bare hands; however, I argue that this could also be a formal directive to declare himself as one who has power that deserves recognition—perhaps an advisory note on how to behave upon returning home.

Wealhtheow's final three imperatives serve to dictate what Beowulf's life should be like and how he should treat her family moving forward. Much like the last speech, these final imperatives seem to hold the most power—the first of which serves as a directive in how to interact with her sons: *ond þyssonum cnyhtum wes lara liðe*.³⁵ She also blesses Beowulf in what feels like a royal decree: *wes þenden þu lifige, æpeling, eadig*.³⁶ Her final imperative returns to her sons and how Beowulf should act with them moving forward: *beo þu suna minum dædum gedefe*.³⁷ This, as Bloomfield points out, is telling Beowulf to “continue to observe ethical rules and to honor tribal debts as he had with Hrothgar.”³⁸ She is commanding Beowulf's future interactions with her sons and ensuring the safety of her kingdom with a foreign ally. Again, this is the queen's responsibilities and power playing out before the reader by way of issuing directives to her king and guest.

If we are to take Alfred Bammesberger's translation of the final line of Wealhtheow's speech—*druncne dryhtguman doð sƿa ic bidde*³⁹—we could add an additional imperative to our list above. This line is commonly translated as “the warriors have drunk well. They do as I bid,” taking *doð* to be the third person plural indicative and *druncne dryhtguman* to refer to the process of the hall-attendees getting drunk or becoming merry with alcohol, yet Bammesberger has pointed out that this could be read

34. Declare yourself with power.

35. And to these boys be gracious in counsel.

36. Be while you live, prince, blessed.

37. Be thou to my sons fitting in deeds.

38. Bloomfield, “Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of Wealhtheow.”

39. Having drunk [from the cup], retainers, do as I bid!

in the second person imperative as well and as directly addressing the hall-attendees.⁴⁰ If this is the case, Wealhtheow not only has an even higher density and usage of imperatives but also is closing her speech to Beowulf by telling her *dryhtguman* to do as she bids. This directive leaves little, if any, room for refusal as an answer to any of her bidding to anyone—except, perhaps, Hrothgar who is not willing to go against her regardless. Further, it is also possible that she is referring to Hrothgar and Beowulf as her *dryhtguman*, or her own retainers, warriors, or men, as they are the only two she has just bid to do anything and would serve as the only two needing this final imperative. This is unlikely but would pose an even larger point towards her being the most powerful figure in the poem. Regardless, Wealhtheow does present as the most commanding character by way of issuing the most commands—more than Hrothgar to Beowulf in his famous “sermon,” and more than either man to their men by sheer number of imperatives per line.

40. Alfred Bammesberger, “The Conclusion of Wealhtheow’s Speech (‘Beowulf’ 1231),” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91, no. 2 (1990), 207–8, <https://jstor.org/stable/43345793>.

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