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TEXTILES AND TEXTILE IMAGERY IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

Maren Clegg Hyer

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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As in many other cultures, textiles and textile production figured significantly in the everyday life of the Anglo-Saxons. The literary result of this important craft was the use of textile imagery in particular, textile metaphor in Old English literature, including the following: peaceweaving, death-weaving, fate-weaving, creation- and water-weaving, word-weaving, and spider-weaving. While the occurrence of textile metaphor in the Old English corpus has been noted in the past, this study is unique in that it seeks first to analyze and reconstruct the material culture of textile production among the Anglo-Saxons from archaeological and textual records as a crucial step in understanding the full range of Old English textile metaphors and what they might have meant to the Anglo-Saxons.

This study is also unique in that it compiles the Old English textile metaphors and analyzes their resonance in direct relationship to the material culture of textiles. In the dissertation, I compile a number of the significant analogues which may or may not have influenced the development of textile metaphor in Old English literature. This dissertation argues that textile metaphors and images in Old English literature are linked by a common resonance which may be the product of an understanding of the material culture of textiles of Anglo-Saxon times as a visual analogue. The examination of Old English textile imagery has interesting implications for textile imagery which occurs in great profusion in virtually all cultures which have cotidiarian contact with textile production.
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*Bus ic . . . wordcraeftum waef*

(“Elene” 1236a-37a)
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Introduction

Recent interest in textile studies has shown remarkable growth, particularly interest in discovering and recognizing textile imagery or metaphor in cultures the world over. A number of studies have demonstrated the attractiveness of textile technology as a basis for many of the metaphorical and mythic abstractions of cultures worldwide. Textile production is women’s work in most cultures, and in Muslim North Africa, for example, women have invested their domestic weaving with metaphoric and symbolic gender representation as a “resonant analogy between the loom and life”: basically, the warp of the loom is considered a male with a soul and life of its own. While the warp is being prepared, it represents a young male subservient to his mother. When the warp takes its place on the loom, it represents the maturing male who takes precedence over his mother. After he is prepared and “completed,” he is cut down from the loom and “loosed” on the world. Each stage is mediated by the mother, who is the weft.

As John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro’s work, The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric, shows, the Greeks likewise utilized textile imagery in defining gender relations. Plato’s Statesman, for example, describes how the loom interweaves opposites in the warp and weft. In Greek culture, this image extends to marriage, with the stiff vertical warp identified as grammatically and symbolically masculine and the softer horizontal weft as grammatically and symbolically feminine. As weaving draws the sets of threads together, so the cloth of marriage brings together human males and females. Seneca explains the same image to his Roman audience in his Letters to Lucilius, equating marriage with the interweaving of straight warp (male) and supportive weft.
(female). In North America as well as in Europe and Africa, "spinning and weaving acted as metaphors for sexuality, childbirth, and female life-cycles." Among the Mexican women of Post-Classic Mexico, the spinning whorl with the spindle within represented coitus, the filling spindle a pregnant woman. The associations of female gender with textile production are perhaps inevitable given its frequent assignment to the female. In many ways, the gendered metaphors of textile production are an insight into women's mythology of their world and their power. In Post-Classic Mexican codices, one finds, "the use of weaving tools, especially battens, as weapons or as staffs of authority to represent female power." The relevance of such images for the present study is that similar metaphors relating and often equating gender roles with aspects of textile production or textile tools are also scattered throughout Old English literature. One example is the term *spinelkin*, which identifies the maternal line in legal texts. There is also some archaeological evidence that textile tools symbolically identified a woman's status as well as her gender among the Anglo-Saxons.

Textile studies have also documented an interesting common link between weaving and the maintenance of cosmic order or peace. The Shinto text *Kojiki* (early eighth century) describes a mythic struggle between the Sun Goddess and her brother. Amaterasu (the Sun Goddess) sits in a "pure weaving hall [seeing to the] weaving of the garments of the gods." Her brother breaks in suddenly, frightening the "heavenly weaving maiden" so greatly that she accidentally impales her womb with her shuttle and dies. After this, darkness and chaos come to the earth for a time. The female creation deity, as a female, performs her role in the cosmos through weaving. Moreover, "The
very instrument of the maintenance of order is here the shuttle, and the meaning of the weaving hall itself begins to emerge in the symbol of the loom on which the cosmic order is woven. In contrast, the masculine warrior prototype represents the principle of disorder, a “destructive because undisciplined power” in direct opposition to weaving. The source of the Shinto rite is found in a related Chinese myth of the Heavenly Maiden, a constellation-figure separated from another, the Cowherd, by the Milky Way (descriptive of segregated gendered roles). Once a year, during her festival, the two are ritually joined in marriage, making the Heavenly Weaving Maiden a patron of marriage and women’s work. The Maiden’s role is much like that of the peaceweavers of Old English literature, who weave peace and order in their societies despite violent actions of warrior counterparts.

Weaving as creation is another common image among textile cultures, as in the North American Southwest among the Tewa people, a branch of the Hopi, who utter this prayer:

Then weave for us a garment of brightness:
May the warp be the white light of morning,
May the weft be the red light of evening,
May the fringes be the falling rain,
May the border be the standing rainbow.
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness,
That we may walk fittingly where birds sing,
That we may walk fittingly where the grass is green,
Oh our Mother the Earth, Oh our Father the Sky.

In West Africa, weaving is also a metaphor for the cosmogonic process as the language used to identify the gods is created through cosmic weaving: “Spirit speaks and its words fill all the interstices of the cloth; they were woven in the threads and make the body of
the cloth. They were the weaving itself and the weaving was the words. And that is why cloth is called sev, which means, ‘It is speech.’ Among the Greeks, one concept of creation was that a living being is produced the same way a net is woven. The Old English corpus contains a similar connection between textile production and cosmic creation in the riddling figure of “woven” nature in The Exeter Book Riddle #40.

Much of the cosmic weaving in textile cultures is a logical result of the attribution of mortal gender roles to creationary goddess figures. Thus, goddesses of Post-Classic Mexico did what mortal women did: “The metaphors expressed in mythology served to transform the natural into the supernatural, creating an ideological mystification of gender relationships and defining a female identity.” The relationship of mortal and immortal gender characteristics also explains the common Indo-European concept of fate goddesses: Germanic, Greek, and Roman mythologies all contain legends of immortal females who spin and weave the birth, deeds, and death of each mortal. Similarly, among the Lithuanians, “The dieves valditoyes were seven goddesses, the first one spun the lives of men out of a distaff given her by the highest god, the second set up the warp, the third wove in the woof . . . the sixth cut the threads, the seventh washed the garment and gave it to the most high god, and it became the man’s winding-sheet. Of the seven, only three spin or weave.” Anglo-Saxon culture is no exception to this Indo-European paradigm, since even as a Christianized figure, Anglo-Saxon fate (wyrd) is personified as a weaver.

Textile metaphors proliferate in other socially gendered contexts as well. The association and disassociation of writing and weaving begin with gender; among the Tamang of Nepal, maleness is represented by writing and femaleness by weaving.
Philomela’s communication to her sister Procne suggests a similar yet different relationship of weaving and “writing.” In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, after Philomela is raped and her tongue cut out by Procne’s husband Tereus, she weaves a design communicating her fate to Procne. Procne “reads” the story in the cloth, frees her sister, and takes terrible revenge on Tereus through the slaughter of their child.\(^\text{22}\) When she cannot speak, Philomela turns to her weaving to “write” to Procne. Socrates calls Philomela’s disembodied communication the “voice of the shuttle,” but the communication between the sisters is much more like writing in its reliance on symbol.\(^\text{23}\) Current Peruvian textile production suggests a similar use of weaving as writing: local *llikllas* or shawls have the intended purpose to be a “prayer to the spirit world.”\(^\text{24}\) Each one also contains geometric motifs which are “small codes of hidden individual or personal meaning,” meanings which are legible to the intended audience.\(^\text{25}\)

Catherine des Roches (1542-1587) reacts against the gendered opposition of pen and distaff which existed in the textile cultures of her day; many male humanists treated great women writers of the time as anomalies who had “traded” the distaff for the pen.\(^\text{26}\) Like Christine de Pisan, Catherine lauds domestic arts such as spinning and weaving, and she also writes an ode to a distaff which connects textuality and her work.\(^\text{27}\) She refuses the opposition created between the distaff and the pen as a mirror of socially prescribed gender roles. Old English literature likewise contains a connection between weaving and the creation of poetic texts, although not apparently gender-based, as Cynewulf’s “word-weaving” illustrates.

Another common textile metaphor which the Anglo-Saxons share with other
cultures is the spider as spinner and weaver. In Japanese, the verb “to spin” tsumugu can also describe a spider making a web. The most famous Western association of spider and weaver comes from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, in which the Greek woman Arachne changes from unparalleled human weaver to spider. Arachne is famous for skill in spinning and weaving so fine that immortals come to see her cloths, “not only when they were completed, but even while they were still being woven. There was such grace in Arachne’s skilful movements, whether she was winding the coarse yarn into balls . . . or working the stuff with her fingers, drawing out the fleecy cloud of wool, with constant handling, into one long soft thread, or whether she was twirling the slender spindle with deft thumb, or embroidering the finished material.” Warned by Minerva (Athena) to claim only mortal supremacy, Arachne disdains advice and competes with Minerva. The textile imagery is vivid: “each stretched the slender threads on her loom. Then they bound their frames to the crossbeams, separated the threads of the warp with the heddle and, with flying fingers wove the cross-threads in between, by means of the sharp-tipped shuttles. As these threads were drawn through the warp, a blow from the comb with its notched teeth beat them into place.” At the conclusion of the contest, Minerva can find no fault with Arachne’s web, and “wild with indignation at her rival’s success, tore to pieces the tapestry which displayed the crimes committed by the gods.” Minerva beats Arachne with a shuttle, and Arachne hangs herself in rebellion and is turned to a spider, weaving ever after.

These textile metaphors occur in widely varied times, languages, cultures, and geographies, and more importantly, with widely divergent materials and modes of textile
production. Old English literature itself contains a variety of interesting and remarkably similar uses of textile imagery. To date, no one has examined this imagery in a way that might contribute meaningfully to the growing body of textile studies as well as to Anglo-Saxon studies. However, until the textile imagery of Old English literature is analyzed within its own context as a product of textile production, its full meaning cannot be grasped, much less placed within the larger tradition of textile metaphor worldwide.

The material culture of textile production, an everyday technology in virtually every human society of the pre-industrial age, is by and large lost to industrialized countries and so too, therefore, the imagery based on it. Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* lists a series of metaphors for parts of the mouth, asserting that people may call “the mouth a ship, and the lips the gunwale, the tongue the oar or rudder.” Anyone not as familiar as the Icelanders with ships would probably never think of such an image and find such nautical imagery puzzling, the more so if common. But for those who stared at ships regularly and made them home for any period of time, the analogy would resonate. Although the specific technology (type of loom, spinning process, etc.) used within a given culture introduces variation, pre-industrialized societies were (and are) similarly inundated by the weaving and spinning necessary to keep an entire society clothed physically and ritually, and they were (and are) witness to the process of spun and interwoven threads on a daily basis. This daily familiarity with what is essentially the same general operation the world over provides a visual analogy from which textile imagery and metaphor arise. The cultures in question “see” something which we, the industrialized, have largely lost.
Thus, the experiential understanding of textile production among the Anglo-Saxons gave rise to metaphors which we (products of a mechanized society in which machines do our spinning and weaving) might recognize, but which we cannot fully understand without comprehending that same experiential background, precisely because Anglo-Saxon understanding of textile technology lent a peculiar resonance to each textile metaphor that is alien or "other" to many within our contemporary culture. Our lack of understanding can lead to serious difficulty not simply in comprehending the resonance of a textile metaphor, but even in recognizing one. In her discussion of why Old English riddles with rather obvious textile overtones have often been misunderstood, Erika von Erhardt-Siebold argues: "The partial or complete misunderstanding of these riddles is to be explained by the several commentators' insufficient knowledge . . . of the art of weaving as practiced by the Greeks and Romans and the peoples of early mediaeval Europe."34

This study is intended for those who find such textile imagery interesting and wish not only to examine the prevalence of textile imagery in Old English literature, but who would also like to understand it, as well as those who wish to compare Old English textile production and imagery with the larger worldwide corpus. While both author and readers can never move beyond a mediated and imperfect understanding of the Anglo-Saxon experience, separated as we are by time, geography, history, technology, and sheer lack of abundant evidence, this study will attempt to bridge the gap between current lack of understanding of textile technology and the Anglo-Saxons' wealth of experience with textile technology, particularly as such a knowledge might inform and prepare the reader
to understand more clearly the resonance and possible basis for the extension of textile technology to a textile metaphor. In so doing, this study will draw together information, which, by and large, has not been assembled as a whole, but which sheds light upon the collective corpus of textile imagery within Old English literature, as well as textile imagery worldwide. An understanding of the textile technology of the Anglo-Saxons provides more information and insight for readers of the present than would simply interest an archaeologist; textile technology holds a key to understanding the fascinating world of textile metaphor within the Anglo-Saxon literary world.

The first task this study will undertake is an examination of what is known about the material culture of textiles in Anglo-Saxon England, relying on both archaeological and written sources. Although a sizeable body of information is available to us, there are dangers inherent to the representation of Anglo-Saxon textile production within both sources. Archaeological finds are those that have survived by chance and great luck over millennia, and attestation of wooden tools and textile fibers is inconsistent and perhaps even atypical. The identification of objects as textile-related may also be less than straightforward. Marta Hoffmann, an acclaimed expert in the history of material culture of Northern European textiles, addresses the problem in her discussion of a group of bone combs which were curved and rough, but which some archaeologists labelled “textile tools.”

Scholars and other archaeologists who know something about weaving have disputed the label ever since because the rough and curved nature of the combs would cause them to pull threads out of place rather than compacting them: “in fact they would be disastrous to a weave.” This is but one of many “imaginative identifications”
Hoffmann has encountered in years of expert reconstruction of early textile technology. On the other hand, archaeologists sometimes fail to recognize a textile tool simply from a general lack of understanding of the technologies of early medieval textiles.

Textual evidence is also problematic. One of the major difficulties of trying to form a picture of the material culture of Anglo-Saxon textiles from written sources is the imprecise correlation between word and object inherent to language itself. Without having the physical referent present to illustrate exactly what each writer means by a word, we are left to reconstruct the information from indirect references. Even considering the archaeological evidence available, the task can be daunting. For example, *hapax legomena* abound among words known to be related to textiles; among the twenty-one words grouped as textile terms in *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* (a guide to an Old English reeve listing needful household tools), four are *hapax legomena*: *flexinian*, *timplean*, *sceadele*, and *presse* (15.1). We rely on Latin antecedents and Germanic cognates or the etymologies of related terms to help us reconstruct an understanding of their meaning. Other words which seem to be related to textiles, such as *cip* in *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* (15.1), gloss several different words elsewhere. The *hapax legomena*, variable glossing of the same word, and other lexical problems make word to word correlation somewhat difficult.

These problems are compounded by the simple fact that a word generally means something different to different people depending on time, region, social class, gender, and even personal experience. In a period spanning more than five hundred years and several different ethnic and linguistic groups, temporal and regional differences are
difficult to identify. Moreover, those who worked more closely with textile production because of social class or gender role would probably have used a level of specificity in their discussions of textiles different from that represented in other texts, as the wills of women such as Wulfwaru, Wulfgyð, and Wynflæd seem to suggest. In most texts, the word *wahryft* means a generic "wall covering." But the wills of the three women include compounds such as *heallwahrit* ("hall wall-covering") and *bedwahritis* ("bedroom wall-covering") to identify specific textiles in their possession. The reeve's list of textile implements in *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* furnishes another example in that two tools that are often conflated in other texts, *pihten* and *amb*, appear side by side in this text (15.1). Both can refer to a beater used to compact the weft strands together on the loom. But in the reeve's case, they probably describe two distinct tools—one a toothed beater and the other a continuous-edged beater. The present day lexicographer generally has no clear indication of the level of specificity intended within a given text. More basic difficulties of matching word to object include the possibility of scribal error and the relative scarcity of Old English texts.

The pictorial record, primarily located in manuscripts, is not always a help. As Hoffmann states, "A painting or another artistic rendering is an interpretation by the artist of the object he wants to depict, not a photographic reproduction . . . . Tools [or] [instance] can not in any case be regarded as technical drawings, meant to give a correct reproduction." She indicates: "Even contemporary pictures should not be taken at face value without supporting evidence from other sources." In her analysis of pictorial sources in Anglo-Saxon art, Gale Owen-Crocker finds that, at least in terms of costume
and dress information, the pictorial sources are as likely to represent stylized or symbolic textiles as "real" ones.43

In this study, every effort has been made to address these problems, primarily through adopting the approach of the excellent reconstructive linguist and archaeologist E. J. W. Barber.44 In her attempts to gain insight on textile technology in Palaeolithic Europe and the Near East, she juxtaposes archaeological evidence with linguistic evidence, analyzing both in the context of her personal knowledge of textile production. By using this interdisciplinary approach, Barber has been able to make valuable contributions in reconstructing the difficult early history of textiles. The present study will attempt to examine known archaeological evidence alongside textual evidence, as well, with the added perspective of some understanding and hands-on experience with the textile tools used and processes performed by the Anglo-Saxons. The object of this reconstruction will be to aid the reader in acquiring an understanding and a visual image of the process of textile production referred to obliquely in Old English texts.

After interpreting this reconstruction of evidence for Anglo-Saxon textile production, I will turn to analyzing the metaphors in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons which utilize textile imagery, including peaceweaving and death-weaving; weaving of fate, creation, and water; weaving of words; spider-weaving; and embroidery as virtue. Conceptually, the distribution of the metaphors demonstrates the widespread application of metaphorical function to textile production. Arising from this distribution, one question which this study will attempt to address is why metaphors based on textile production were attractive to Anglo-Saxon authors. I will also include relevant analogues
to the textile metaphors of Old English literature as they shed light upon this question as well as upon the relationship of Old English textile imagery to the larger body of classical, medieval, and renaissance literature.

Since a major focus of this thesis is the use of textile metaphors within the corpus of Old English literature, some discussion about the meaning intended by the term "metaphor" may be useful. The traditional Western view of metaphor derives from the Platonic division of poetry and truth. Such an approach to poetic language involves viewing metaphor as a stylistic device ornamenting poetic texts, a decorative trope with no social impact. Although the ornamental function of metaphor cannot be denied, the conclusion that metaphor has no social impact is not foregone. Therefore, while in this study the term "metaphor" means the figurative use of language which indicates an understood comparison between one thing or action and another, I assume its implications extend beyond the traditional restriction to aesthetic impact alone. The comparative act is a significant moment, a moment in which a user of language forges a perceptive link which did not previously exist between separate subjects. That link generally helps language users to make sense of an abstract concept in concrete terms. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state: "metaphor pervades our normal conceptual system. Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience . . . we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms . . . . This need leads to metaphorical definition in our conceptual system." They add: "metaphors make sense of our experience."
A metaphor survives over time only if it seems apt or at least remains attractive enough to resonate for subsequent language users. When a metaphor does so well that it eventually forms part of a web of related metaphors, it is probable that the metaphor is in keeping with the social and cultural values of its language users. Because metaphor both derives from and affects cultural perception, “New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to.”

For example, the “time is money” metaphor has changed the face of industrialized Western world in this century. Metaphors of the past as well as present “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality.”

How does such a view of the performative power of metaphor relate to the textile metaphors of Old English literature? First, the textile metaphors of Old English literature are based on a material culture of textiles with which language users must have been reasonably familiar, given both the number and the systematic use of textile metaphors in the language. Old English speakers utilized textile imagery frequently in rendering abstractions into concrete images. For example, at some point, a language user attempted to render the notion of diplomatic peacemaking in more concrete and yet poetic form by equating it to peaceweaving. I will argue in a later chapter that this probably arises from the connection between the most common holder of the peaceweaver’s role, the woman, and her everyday duties as textile producer. Whatever the source of the link, subsequent
language users found it resonant enough that the term is used in more than one text and survives in the textual artifacts of the language. That the peaceweaving metaphor forms part of a much larger body of textile metaphors within Old English literature suggests again that textile production formed part of the imaginative body of concepts readily available to language users in Anglo-Saxon culture. A “metaphor” such as peaceweaving is thus a literary, comparative act which is meaningful in social and cultural ways.

In terms of scope, this study will necessarily restrict itself to an examination of the primary texts extant in Old English literature, as well as some related Anglo-Latin texts as they illuminate the issues addressed, although a number of Greek, Latin, and Germanic texts will be cited as analogical or genealogically related material. Although secondary works examining textile imagery in Old English currently exist, this study presents new evidence by virtue of its mode of collection: a drawing together of both a reconstruction of the material culture of Anglo-Saxon textiles and the collected textile metaphors associated with that culture. This method may enable more readers not only to understand the textile allusions, but also to sense the resonances inherent in the common body of textile metaphor within Old English literature and Anglo-Saxon culture.

Notes

Introduction


5. Scheid and Svenbro 89.


11. Miller 27.

12. Miller 32.


15. quoted in Miller 43.

16. quoted in Miller 44.


25. Seibold 185.


27. Larsen 296.

28. Miller 39, n. 36.


39. If *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* is a representative example, the order of terms is not always an aid. Although the first four terms in the list, *flexlinan, spinle, reol, gearnwinda* closely mirror the proper order of tools used in fiber preparation, in other sections of the list, the order seems more chaotic: e.g., the insertion of a carding comb, *wulcamb* in the midst of weaving equipment (if we understand the term correctly) (15.1). Some groupings seem intentional, such as the roughly alliterative *wifte, wefte, wulcamb*
and *sceadele, seamsticcan, scearra* (15.1). R. G. Poole points out that *presse, pihten, simplean* are the three foreign borrowings within the list and they may be grouped together intentionally (473). But other peculiarities, such as the absence of a term for a rather crucial tool, the distaff, illustrate how problematic our sources are.

40. Poole 471-72.

41. Hoffmann, “Textile” 239.

42. Hoffmann, “Textile” 244.


46. Lakoff and Johnson 115.

47. Lakoff and Johnson 139.

48. Lakoff and Johnson 145.

49. Lakoff and Johnson 159.
Chapter 1: The Material Culture of Anglo-Saxon Textiles: The Process

PREPARATION OF FIBERS AND SPINNING

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxons used primarily wool and flax for textile production; most Anglo-Saxon textile finds are identified upon analysis as one or the other (although wool is more common). Preparation of these fibers has been relatively standard since prehistory: after preliminary processing, which in the case of wool included carding (aligning the fibers with wooden, comb-like paddles) and thorough washing or, in the case of flax, retting (rotting the outer casing of the plant), beating the casing open with a mallet (scutching), and combing out the shorter “tow” (hackling), the fibers are dressed (tied loosely) on a distaff, a tool which can range in size from an arm-length stick with a notch in the top to a pole several feet tall with a rack at the top (particularly for flax).¹

Once the fibers are thus prepared, the spinner draws the fibers from the distaff down through her fingers into twisted thread with the help of a rotating spindle (pencil-like in length and shape, but usually thicker) stabilized inside a spindle whorl (like a large bead), with the spindle often rolled off the thigh and dropped to spin freely. Such finished thread can range from very fine to twine, depending upon the skill and needs of the spinner. Silk thread was also available to the Anglo-Saxons, as was silk fabric. However, most scholars assume silk thread was imported and that silkworms were not raised locally. Two other spinning tools might have found their way into the Anglo-Saxon spinner’s hands: once spun thread fills the spindle, it is generally removed and measured by being wound off the spindle onto a reel and then rewound into skeins.
(meaning standard lengths of yarn or thread) on a swift (see Figure 1A). There is some question as to whether reels and particularly swifts were in use at this early period, since winding the spindle yarn into a ball long predates winding machinery such as reels and swifts, or the much later spinning wheel.

According to David Wilson, archaeological evidence for these methods of preparation and spinning among the Anglo-Saxons includes combs for carding wool and possibly flax, as well as the ubiquitous spindle whorl made from everything from glass paste and soapstone to rock crystal and bone. Teeth from combs which appear to have been either flax hackles or wool combs have been discovered on sites from both early and middle Anglo-Saxon times, such as an Anglian eighth to ninth-century site containing 15 spikes, to sites from the later tenth to eleventh century Anglo-Scandinavian period, such as York, where over 180 teeth and a comb with traces of wool fibers in its teeth were found. Wilson notes further: “Flax-retting trenches have been found in late Anglo-Saxon levels at Oxford.” Spindles and distaffs are rare, since wood does not tend to survive across the centuries. However, in at least one tenth to eleventh-century York find, spindles and whorls “littered” the site alongside other textile implements. No reels or swifts have been identified from the Anglo-Saxon period in archaeological finds. Analogous tools have been discovered in archaeological contexts in contemporary Northern Europe, however, which suggests the likelihood of their use in England during the same period. At the Oseberg ship find, which dates from the ninth century, two reels were found, as well as a swift.

Written evidence concerning textile fibers and their preparation supports and
Figure 1A: Reel and Yarnwinder
augments archaeological finds. An Old English charter stipulates the duties of peasants in Hampshire: “hi sculan waxan sceap, sciran on hiora agenre hwhile” ("they must wash sheep and shear them in their own time") (11). In the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Bede mentions linen as well as wool cloth worn by seventh-century Anglo-Saxons, poor and rich alike. Other sources identify the tools used to prepare these fibers. One text already mentioned, the Old English Be gesceadwisan gerefan (found in a late eleventh or early twelfth-century manuscript, but whose date of composition is considered tenth century) lists the textile tools necessary for a good reeve to have, including flexlinan (15.1). David Wilson glosses the word as “linen,” but R. G. Poole as “cords for hanging flax on” or “fibres of flax (before the spinning stage).” Either way, the word obviously refers to flax and its preparation. The introduction to the list in the manuscript suggests working with flax or linen as well; the inventory is described as “fela towtola” (15.1) which can mean “many flax-spinning or linen-working utensils.” Similar information about wool-working can be gleaned from name of the tool wulcamb (15.1), which Poole considers a carding comb.

Another possible reference to preparation of flax and wool is timplean (15.1), which Wilson defines as a carding tool or heckle, but which Poole identifies as a French borrowing for a tool used to stretch cloth into shape on the loom. Since the term is a hapax legomenon, like flexlinan, certainty eludes us, although Poole's definition is more likely given French and later English usage of temple. Both scholars agree that the term slic (15.1) represents some sort of mallet involved in either the retting or cleaning process of flax. However, slic may be related to the finishing process for linen, during which the
surface of linen is glazed “by rubbing the cloth with a heated, hemispherical glass ball,”
known as a “slickstone” in the later Middle Ages. An Old English martyrlogy gives
evidence for the latter in a young nun’s description of a vision of St. Hilda after death:
“seo glytenode . . . swa scynende sunne oððe nigslycod hrægel” (“She shone . . . as the
sun shines or a newly slicked garment”). Silk is also repeatedly mentioned as a source
fiber for textiles, especially as a gift item, including a seventh-century reference to
Boniface V’s gift of silk to King Edwin, Charlemagne’s to Offa and Alcuin’s to the
Archbishop of Canterbury (eighth century), and King Alfred’s to Asser (ninth century).

Written sources also refer to spinning and spinning tools. The term distæf
(“distaff”) occurs 5 times in glossaries. An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary defines the term
“wullmod” as “distaff” as well. Its 5 appearances in glossaries correlate the term to the
same Latin lemma, colus, as distæf. The written record also contains two terms for
spindles, inspin (twice glossing fusus) and spinle (appearing 29 times in glossaries and in
Be gesceadwisan gerefan). References also exist for whorls, as when a leech or physician
is instructed to “nim þone hweorfan þe wif mid spinnda” (“take that whorl with which a
woman spins”) as an aid to cure cheek disease. There are at least two other occurrences
of the term in glossaries. Further textual evidence of the spinning process is found in
the very existence of the common verb spinnan (“to spin”).

Similar written evidence exists for the winding of spun thread. The simplest
winding device, the yarn ball, is found in the term clywen, defined in the Dictionary of
Old English as “ball of thread or yarn” with 11 occurrences. An obvious term for reel
exists as well, hreol or reol with 7 total occurrences, mainly in glossaries. The difficulty
lies in determining the type of reel meant, since historically Latin as well as English terms might refer to more than one design of reel. A similar difficulty arises in determining the meaning of another winding mechanism, *gearnwindan*. The term appears 10 times in Old English, mostly in glossaries with the exception of *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* and two problematic occurrences in a charter. Both Wilson and Poole identify it as a “yarn-winder,” but Poole adds that such tools are “also known as ‘swifts’ in Modern English.” Although *gearnwindan* could just as easily be similar to or synonymous with *reol* and mean a stick reel, the identification of the pair *reol* and *gearnwindan* as a stick reel and swift is attractive and matches the roughly contemporary Oseberg find. Moreover, the word *garnvinda* means swift in present-day Scandinavian languages, and Marta Hoffmann suggests that it may be an older term. On the other hand, in a fifteenth-century English pictorial glossary, a hand-drawing for *rele* shows a swift with a crank for turning (see Figure 1B). Or alternatively, can the *reol* be the swift in the pair or are the terms occasionally interchangeable? In *Be gesceadwisan gerefan*, at least, since *reol* and *gearnwindan* appear side by side, the two tools referred to are probably the reel and the swift, respectively.

Another unusual term which resists interpretation and which may be related is *cранцстяви*, which appears as a textile implement in *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* (15.1). Wilson identifies the word as a “swift or reel,” but Poole as a “crank rod” of indeterminate meaning. Poole discusses at length the attempts of scholars over the last two centuries to define the word without much success and suggests two possibilities: first, as suggested by Wilson and others, the term may refer to some kind of swift or reel
Figure 1B: Fifteenth-century Pictorial Gloss of a Reel
turned by a crank, and second, it could refer to a crank-rod which might have been used to turn the top beam of a warp-weighted loom.\textsuperscript{35} Another term which seems related to this debate occurs in the tenth-century will (surviving in an eleventh-century manuscript) of Wynflæd. She frees a female slave, called a crencestran, who works with textiles (30).\textsuperscript{36} Poole suggests that turning a crank-rod on a loom hardly seems time-consuming or important enough a task to deserve a title for the operator.\textsuperscript{17} If indeed a swift or reel with a crank-rod to turn existed as early as the Anglo-Saxon period, turning the crank, especially in a manorial workshop, would be a time-consuming task, perhaps worthy of a special designation. Swifts or reels with cranks certainly existed in later centuries, as the fifteenth-century illustration depicts.

\textit{WEAVING}

Anglo-Saxon weaving technique was based on the use of the warp-weighted loom. The warp-weighted loom consists of two upright beams and a horizontal beam to which the warp threads are attached at one end. At the other end, the warp threads are gathered in bundles and tied to loom weights of stone or baked clay, for which the loom is named. Once the warp threads are weighted and tied to the loom, the loom can be set upright and leaned against a roof beam or the wall. Then, fabric is woven as horizontal thread (the weft) passes through the vertical, weighted warp on a shuttle, a wooden implement which holds the thread on a spool or bobbin. The pattern of the fabric is formed as one set of threads is lifted up by looped threads attached to a rod (the heddle rod, with more than one rod used when more complex weaves are desired) and the shuttle passes through the resulting space (the shed). Then, the heddle rod is lowered and the
shuttle passes through the shed again.

Weights from warp-weighted looms are among the most common and prolific archaeological finds within the period.\textsuperscript{38} The frequency of finds of loom-weights suggests that “Such looms may have been present in every household.”\textsuperscript{39} Wilson states, “The most important piece of domestic equipment in the Anglo-Saxon house may well have been the loom . . . . the loom would be a normal piece of equipment in practically every household.”\textsuperscript{40} Marta Hoffmann cites discoveries of loom weights from a find \textit{in situ} in Grimstone End, Pakenham, Suffolk, a site which “probably dates from the seventh century A.D.” and also finds dating from the eighth to the tenth century in England.\textsuperscript{41} Up to the seventh century, the clay weights were annular, but afterwards became “bun-shaped.”\textsuperscript{42} Because loom weight finds are scarcer toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, scholars suspect different types of looms were taking precedence from the eleventh century onward.

To this writer’s knowledge, we are unaware of any name for the weights or a textile-specific name for the entire loom,\textsuperscript{43} but textual evidence confirms that the Anglo-Saxons could name both \textit{wearp} (“warp”), which occurs 7 or 8 times in glossaries as well as in \textit{Exeter Book} Riddle \#35,\textsuperscript{44} and the weft, identified by two terms \textit{weft} and \textit{wefl}. The first term is clearly equivalent to modern English “weft,” with 11 occurrences, mainly in glossarial texts and in \textit{Be gesceadwisian gerefan}.\textsuperscript{45} The second term is more indeterminate. It is clearly textile-related. In \textit{Be gesceadwisian gerefan}, for instance, it appears alongside \textit{wifte} (15.1). In at least 11 of its occurrences, the word seems equivalent to “weft” (Latin lemma \textit{cladica} in various forms),\textsuperscript{46} but 7 other occurrences
gloss Latin lemma *panucla* and its derivatives, a word roughly equivalent to "pieces of cloth." What *wifte* means alongside *weft* in the list of textile tools remains a mystery. It could simply be scribal error. The confusion over the term is illustrated in scholars' attempts to define the term: Wilson defines *wifte* as "warp thread" and *weft* as "weft thread," while Poole suggests the reverse. Neither author lists the reasoning behind his definition.

As with many other wooden textile tools, no shuttles have been discovered in an Anglo-Saxon context. However, the term *hrisil/hrisel* clearly means "shuttle." According to the *Concordance*, the word occurs 15 times in glossaries, Riddle #35, and an interlinear gloss of Aldhelm’s riddle (the probable source of Riddle #35). The word *scytel*, which is the source of the modern English "shuttle," does not seem to have a specialized textile association in the texts which remain from the period, although its general sense of "dart" or "arrow" renders the eventual association logical. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the first clear example of its use in this sense does not occur until the fourteenth century. However, a term from *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* may be related to *scytel*. The word *sceadle* (15.1) is a *hapax legomenon*. Poole suggests that it may represent some kind of sheath, on the basis of Agnes Geijer and Marta Hoffmann’s note that "in some types of pre-industrial weaving the warp threads were sheathed to protect the fingers." Wilson, however, defines the term as "shuttle," which has some merit both in the obvious sound similarities and the absence of another term for such a commonplace piece of weaving equipment in the list. While the term is suggestive, there is simply not enough evidence to hazard a definitive
A number of rods and tools were probably used in connection with the warp-weighted loom. As already mentioned, the warp-weighted loom very likely had heddle bars or rods attached to sets of warp threads (for example, every other thread) by loose loops of thread so that the designated warp threads could be lifted simultaneously to form the shed, then alternated. Although heddle bars or rods (wooden tools, naturally) have not been discovered in archaeological finds, Marta Hoffmann is confident the looms in use in Northern Europe in the early Middle Ages were equipped with heddle rods; Hoffmann argues that loom weights in situ, such as the Grimstone End find mentioned previously, seem to have fallen from the loom during a fire in two divided rows. This would suggest the use of at least one heddle bar. As Hoffmann states, the weights “support the theory that the warp-weighted loom was . . . a true loom with heddles.”

Moreover, archaeological finds demonstrate that Anglo-Saxons clearly wove the kind of fabrics with complex weaves which would suggest the need for multiple heddle rods.

Textual sources list a term which is almost certainly related to the heddle or heddle rod, *hefeld*. Bosworth and Toller define this term as “Thread for weaving,” but the Old English context generally suggests the more specific meaning of the heddle thread. In its glossarial appearances, the word and its derivatives are equated with Latin *licia* (also in various forms). In the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *licia* is defined as both a “length of yarn, a thread,” and “(in weaving) A leash or heddle.” A related compound, *hefeldpræd* is identical in meaning and glosses the same Latin word family. In one case, the term glosses Latin *liciatorium*. Although *liciatorium* is related to the *licia* group,
Bosworth and Toller suggest that the gloss "seems a mistake for *hebelgerd,*" since this related compound, which Bosworth and Toller initially define as a "shuttle" and then amend as "weaver's beam" generally glosses *liciatorium* and refers to a different part of the heddle mechanism, the heddle rod itself. Other glosses of *liciatorium* include *lorh uel webbeam, websceaf,* and *web beam,* all indicating that a bar or shaft related to weaving is meant. Hoffmann points out a cognate *hafald* in Scandinavian languages which signifies heddle.

A related verb, *helfeldian* in the form of *hefeldige* corresponds to the Latin lemma *ordior; Wæs heueldad, ongunnen,* appear as a double gloss to *ordiretur.* The Latin verb *ordior* was "first used as a weaving term," and means "To lay the warp of (a web)" or by extension, "To begin." The Old English verb very probably shares the dual sense of "beginning a warp" (in particular, securing the warp threads with interwoven heddle threads) and "beginning," given the verb's clear resemblance to *hefeld.* A second reference which confirms the textile association is found in a gloss in the Lambeth Psalter. The Latin text describes the collapse of the speaker's life, which is likened to being "gehefaldad" ("ordirer") while it is being cut off "fram wefendum wife" ("a textente," "by a weaving woman"). The reference makes sense when envisioning a loom; the speaker's life is the set of warp threads tied to the loom and the heddle threads as the work is begun (with all the attendant expectation), but life is cut short precipitously by the "weaving woman."

Written references as well as archaeological finds also suggest the kinds of complex fabric weaves which would have required heddles and heddle rods. The *Vision*
of Leofric describes a hanging fabric of some complexity: "\textquotesingle\textquotesingle bæftan þam weofede\textquotesingle: \textquotesingle an þrilig wæhrægl 7 swyðe þice gewefen.\textquotesingle\textsuperscript{67} Milton Gatch interprets: \textquotesingle\textquotesingle It denotes a fabric woven with a warp of three leashes, triple-twilled to achieve its weight.\textquotesingle\textsuperscript{68} The leashes mentioned are identical to heddles.

Other terms which seem to describe parts of the loom include *cip, huma/uma, webgerepnu, webgerodes, stodlan, lorg, webbeam, websceaf*, and *meoduma*. What renders analysis of these terms difficult is their rarity and that they may all refer to any one (or more than one) of the parts which made up a loom (two uprights, one winding beam, heddle rods, etc.). The *Dictionary of Old English* defines *cip* in its one textile occurrence (*Be gesceadwisan gerefan 15.1*) as a \textquotesingle\textquotesingle weaver\textquotesingle s beam.\textquotesingle\textsuperscript{69} Poole\textquotesingle s analysis of the Old English term in the context of cognates suggests that it means something like \textquotesingle\textquotesingle yoke beam,\textquotesingle or the top beam of the loom.\textquotesingle\textsuperscript{70} Another term associated with a loom is *huma/uma*, which is equated with *scapus* in glossaries.\textsuperscript{71} The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *scapus* as a shaft, which in a weaving context is \textquotesingle\textquotesingle one of the rods to which the leashes are attached.\textquotesingle\textsuperscript{72} Two other words which appear in lists of textile implements in glossaries are *webgerepnu* and *webgerodes*. Both terms gloss Latin *tala* or *tara* (scribal error?),\textsuperscript{73} probably meaning *talea* or a long, thin piece of wood or metal.\textsuperscript{74} This might refer to a loom shaft of some kind, but which kind is unclear.

In his analysis of *Be gesceadwisan gerefan*, Wilson identifies another term, *stodlan*, as a \textquotesingle\textquotesingle weaving baton or pin-beater,\textquotesingle\textsuperscript{75} but Poole suggests it means the uprights for a vertical loom.\textsuperscript{76} Both agree that *lorgas* are parts of the loom, but Wilson defines the term as the beam of a loom while Poole calls *lorgas* heddle-rods.\textsuperscript{77} Glossarial evidence
equates *liciatorium* ("heddle or heddle rod") with *lorh uel webbeam*, which, as has already been argued, suggests that a more specific loom shaft is intended, the heddle rod.\(^7^8\) The same is true of the term *websceaf* as a gloss of *liciatorium*; it probably refers to the heddle rod.\(^7^9\) Poole notes, however, that *lorh* also glosses *colus*, or "distaff."\(^8^0\) Moreover, in Boniface's description in his letter to Eadburga of a brother's vision, he indicates that the brother saw a maiden steal "*opres mægdnæs lorh,*" which was "*swiðe fægre awrittenne, mid fagum flese*" ("the other maiden's *lorh*" which was "very beautifully inscribed, with a gleaming/variegated fleece").\(^8^1\) In this instance, as well, *lorh* clearly means "distaff" or "spindle," given the association of the fleece with the tool, as well as the tool's mobility. Apparently, *lorh* can mean both "heddle rod" and "distaff."

A similar confusion arises because *webbeam* is equated with *insubula* as well as *liciatorium.*\(^8^2\) Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short's *A Latin Dictionary* defines *insubula* as the "treadle of a weaver's loom,"\(^8^3\) but this definition may be problematic for an Anglo-Saxon context. Looms that used treadles, foot pedals used to change the shed in a vertical loom, were not introduced into Western Europe until around the year 1000 A.D.,\(^8^4\) and the only evidence at this early date comes from eleventh-century northern Germany and Poland.\(^8^5\) No evidence exists for treadles in the Anglo-Saxon period beyond the glosses of *insubula*, another of which is Old English *meoduma/meodoma*,\(^8^6\) and perhaps the dwindling appearance of loom weights in archaeological finds. Bosworth and Toller first equate the latter term with "A weaver's beam,"\(^8^7\) and then amend to "A treadle of a loom."\(^8^8\) One possible solution to the confusion may be that glossators equated one shedding tool with another currently in use, the heddle rod. The use of
webbeam to gloss both liciatorium and insubula might support such a conclusion. On the other hand, perhaps new kinds of looms which used treadles were being introduced earlier than otherwise thought. The word *tredel (tredele, tredelas) is found in Old English, but it means “A step.”\(^8\) No remaining evidence connects tredel to its current meaning until the mid-fifteenth century, when a glossary equates the term with liciatorium.\(^9\) Without question looms with treadles eventually took the place of warp-weighted looms as men took the place of women as weavers in the later Middle Ages in England.

Several tools are used in addition to the loom and its parts during the weaving process. As they are woven, the threads of the weft are packed tightly together by tools called sword beaters or weaving batons (long wooden, iron, or bone shafts which resemble short swords) or pin beaters (smaller versions with fine points to work on individual threads). Examples of both survive in archaeological contexts, although iron sword beaters are the most common implement found. Battens or sword beaters of iron have been found at Sarre, Bifrons, Buckland (Dover), Mitcham, Holywell Row, Spong Hill, Chessel Down, Ozingell, and Finglesham, as well as West Stow, Luton, Ramsgate, and Barton (Lincolnshire).\(^91\) Scholars postulate that most sword beaters would have been carved from wood, which is why more do not survive. Iron sword beaters were probably “a symbol of the rank and social status of their owner.”\(^92\) Pin beaters have also been found, such as a small bone pin beater in an eighth to ninth-century Fishgate find.\(^93\) Another was found in a grave at Buckland, Dover.\(^94\) Penelope Walton indicates that pin beaters were found on the tenth to eleventh-century site 16-22 Coppergate at York, as
A number of written sources list terms which may correlate with these and other weaving tools. *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* lists an *amb* (15.1), defined in the *Dictionary of Old English* as “the reed or slay of a loom” in 3 of its 7 occurrences. Another name for what seems to be the same object is *slea*. A related term, *pihten*, occurs in *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* (15.1), and Poole defines it as a weaving-comb used to help compact the weft. Other occurrences of the word in glossaries equate it with Latin *pecten*, showing that the term is a loan word. In Latin, the term means a toothed comb involved in wool-carding and weaving. Words glossing the related term *pectica are spehete* and *flæpecomb*. Although linguistic evidence and practical knowledge of textile technology would suggest the use of weaving combs to compact the weft, to this writer’s knowledge, no Anglo-Saxon *pihten* has ever been discovered on an archaeological site. However, other wool combs have been found which might shed light on the term. The chief lexical evidence for weaving and the weaving process is the existence of the verb “to weave”: *wefan*. Additional verbs with the sense “to weave” include *bregdan, webbian*, and *windan*. The term *aprawan* can also carry a sense of “to spin.”

Riddles #35, 56, and 70 of *The Exeter Book* provide a valuable glimpse of the loom and associated tools in action through riddle imagery. Each riddle describes a different textile artifact, “loom,” “web on the loom,” and “shuttle,” respectively (solutions listed by Erika von Erhardt-Siebold). Riddle #35 alludes rather clearly to the entire textile process as its narrator (“mailshirt”) summarizes the techniques and materials not
used to produce it despite its designation as a “gewæde” (“garment”) (12b). First, the narrator indicates it is not produced with “wulfe flysum” (“fleeces of wool”) (3b), nor does the “wefle” (“weft”) wind on its behalf (5a). It also has no “wearp” (5b), and no thread “hlimmeð” (“resounds”) on its behalf through “þreata geþræcu” (“the pressure of forces”; tension in the loom?) (6). Likewise, no humming “þræð” (6b) attached to a corresponding “hrutende hrisil” (“humming shuttle”) glides within (the shed of) the narrator (the “loom”) (7). Since the shuttle can so easily glide through an open shed, heddles are probably present. The narrator adds, “ne mec ohwonan sceal am cnyssan” (“no am strikes me anywhere”) (8), suggestive imagery of what an am is and how it is used, to strike up the weft. Riddle #35 parallels other evidence of weaving technology as it describes the warp and weft, the thread winding from the shuttle as it moves within the shed of the loom, and the beater compacting the threads of the weft. But equally important, the riddle also illuminates the sound and feel of weaving a web on a loom.104

Riddle #56 uses imagery which conflates the act of weaving with a battle. The narrator tells of something seen indoors, a “winnende wiht wido bennegean” with “holt hweorfende” (“a struggling creature widely wound” with “the wood turning”) (2-3a). The narrator elaborates that the “creature” receives great “heapoglemma” (“battle-scars”) because “Daroðas væron / weo þære wihte, ond se wudu searwum / fæste gebunden” (“Spears were woeful to the creature, and the wood bound fast with skill”) (3b, 4b-6a). At the same time, one “foot” of the creature held still, while the other “bisgo dreag” (“endured labor”) (7b), moving up and down in the air (8). The confusing imagery makes sense when weaving is visualized. The “struggling creature” is cloth wound onto the
"turning wood" or winding beam of the loom. The cloth receives gashes from "spears" which are most likely sword beaters and a piece of wood "bound fast," which could either be the shuttle, which passes through the "body" of the cloth and is bound on one end to the cloth, or possibly a heddle rod, which would also be bound to the warp threads and would "injure" the cloth by pulling it open. The foot that holds still could be the stationary loom posts, or as von Erhardt-Siebold argues, it could be a parting plank which remains stationary as it holds two rows of loom weights apart. As for the second, moving "foot," it is clearly a heddle rod working back and forth, moving up and down.

The narrator of the riddle mentions a final image of a related object, a "tree" that stands near the "torhtan" creature ("bright or noble") (9). It is "leafum bihongen" ("hung with leaves") (10a). Erika von Erhardt-Siebold suggests that this tree is most likely "a distaff with the flax or wool on it." Hanging flax or wool dressed on a tall distaff (the flax distaff can be as tall as a sapling) could look like a tree hung with leaves and, as von Erhardt-Siebold elaborates, "The plucking of flax off the distaff suggests a leafy tree whose foliage goes into the making of the web. The distaff and the spindle were usually kept near the loom." Although the riddle never mentions the names of the tools involved in this process, the visual imagery employed "mentions all three weaving steps, and it contains an unmistakable and most original reference to a definite method of shedding."

Finally, Riddle #70 describes details of what seems to be an Anglo-Saxon shuttle's design and construction. The narrator's first clue is that the shuttle "Singeō þurh sidan" ("sings through sides") (2a), which is precisely what a shuttle does as it
passes through the warp threads. Further imagery depicts the curious and skillful construction of the "creature"; its sharp neck "hafæl eaxle tua" on its "gescyldrum" ("Has two shoulders on its shoulders") (3b-4a). As in Riddle #56, the rather odd description makes sense when one understands the tool in question. Erika von Erhardt-Siebold elaborates,

If we imagine a needle with the weft-clue in the middle, we may call the needle the shoulders carrying the clue. A side-view of the shuttle shows it carrying on its shoulders the axle, which in turn carries on its shoulders the bobbin with the weft-thread. We thus have two shoulders on two shoulders. The weft-thread is situated midway between the shoulders of the axle and, therefore, is the neck skillfully made . . . The bobbin must like a neck protrude from the body.109

The conclusion to this glance at a weaver's tool comes as the speaker closes the riddle, "His gesceapo dreogeð/ þe swa wraetlice  be wege stonde / heah ond hleortorht hælepum to nytte" ("It fulfills its destiny, that which high and brightly glorious stands so magnificently by the way for the use of men") (4b-6). If the riddle is consistent with Riddle #56, the bright and glorious one is a piece of newly woven cloth.

However, as Craig Williamson points out, lines five and six may not belong to the first four, since the last lines are on a different folio, and the lines include the use of first person verbs instead of the third person verbs used in the first four lines.110 Even if the last two lines are considered part of another riddle, the imagery of the "shuttle" is still largely found in the first four.111 The imagery of all three riddles provides valuable
insight into the textile technology of the Anglo-Saxons as it recreates a mental picture of
the process, which archaeological reconstruction and lexical terms are less able to do.
This imagery is particularly useful since no pictorial sources remain to aid in
reconstruction of the material culture of Anglo-Saxon textiles.

One other pair of references from a Biblical commentary also aids the
reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon perspective of the weaving process. The Anglo-Latin
commentary, probably written in the mid-seventh to mid-eighth centuries, takes great care
to explain the literal meanings of each unfamiliar Biblical image or object in terms its
contemporary audience would understand.\textsuperscript{112} The commentary explains the woof thread
which Abraham refuses to take from the king of Sodom, “Others say that it was a three-
strand rope, or something woven from beneath rather than from above, in the way which
we weave the web.”\textsuperscript{113} In another explanation, the commentator reiterates, “these people
wove from beneath, not like us.”\textsuperscript{114} Michael Lapidge remarks, “The Commentator is
apparently distinguishing between the frameless ground loom, in which the weaver
worked on a warp stretched horizontally from a tree or pegged to the ground between two
beams . . . and the vertical loom.”\textsuperscript{115} Lapidge identifies the vertical loom to which the
Commentator refers as the warp-weighted loom, on which a web is woven from the top
down, or “from above.”\textsuperscript{116} Although Lapidge explains the reference to the warp-weighted
loom as a Mediterranean allusion (since the warp-weighted loom was common to ancient
Greece and Rome),\textsuperscript{117} the likelihood is that the Anglo-Saxon commentator is thinking of
an image much closer to home, an Anglo-Saxon warp-weighted loom. The references are
useful in visualizing the way Anglo-Saxons perceived their own weaving process in
contrast with that of others.

**WEAVES**

Although the good majority of textiles among Anglo-Saxon archaeological remains are only “a few scraps adhering to metal in graves” or “impressions of cloth on corroded metal, we have a fairly good general idea of the capabilities of the weaver of the Anglo-Saxon period,” based on the weaves of the fragments; the weaves tell much about the technology of weaving among the Anglo-Saxons. The simplest weave is a tabby weave, the basic 1 over, 1 under pattern, but a more complex weave, 2 by 2 twill, is most common among the fragments of Anglo-Saxon textiles. The most complex and “luxurious” weaves are the “diamond- or lozenge-pattern twill in which the diamond shape is deliberately made asymmetrical,” which appear in archaeological finds more rarely, but which seem to have been “a favourite with the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians.” The broken twills in particular show “considerable craftsmanship in their production. While the skill of the home-weaver should not be underestimated, these finer textiles display the quality to be expected from a specialist weaving centre.” Broken twills appear in several archaeological finds, including Sutton Hoo and Broomfield.

The weaves would have given a variety of decorative patterns to household textiles. At Sutton Hoo what seems to have been a linen pillow was woven in broken diamond twill, with a “fine plain linen weave like a pillow-case,” and it rested alongside a woolen cloth in an irregular broken diamond pattern. While Sutton Hoo is hardly representative of the common hut, the patterns available to nobility would have been
equally available to the creative and observant poor, even if executed in cruder materials.

FINISHING

Once a fabric is completed, it must be removed from the loom and subjected to a number of finishing steps. Wool generally needs several cleanings to remove dirt, foreign objects, and lanolin. A fuller would perform this step, and further finishing for finer wool textiles might include felting and shearing the surface of the finished cloth to an even length. Shears are fairly common finds in the period, but true finishing shears are hard to distinguish from those used to shear sheep. One example of finishing shears, which were too small to be used for anything else, was found in an eighth to ninth-century Anglian dig at 46-54 Fishergate, York. Shears (scearra) are also included in Be gesceadwisan gerefan (15.1), but it is difficult to tell which kind of shears are intended. Finished linen would be washed and smoothed with linen smoothers (“slickstones”?), a few of which have been found on Anglo-Saxon sites, including tenth to eleventh-century 16-22 Coppergate at York. Cloth, particularly wool, might also have needed to be stretched after fulling.

Textual sources make repeated references to fullers. The Thesaurus of Old English lists wealc as a term for fulling, afulliend, fullere, fulwa, spurnere, and wealcere as terms for fullers. The Old English translation of the Gospel of St. Mark reads: “his reaf wurdon glitiniende swa hwite swa snaw. swa nan fullere ofer eordan ne mæg swa hwite gedon” (“his garment was glittering as white as snow. No fuller over all the earth could cause it to be so white”) (9:3). Another reference from a martyrology describes an angel’s gift to St. Agnes, a garment so glorious, “swylcne nætre nænig fulwa—bæt is
næning webwyrhta—hæt mihte don on eorðan” (“such as never any fuller, that is any webworker, might accomplish on earth”). Although in both of the last examples the description of the fuller’s task is based on a Latin source, clearly the words and concepts existed to translate the passages and suggest the work of the fuller in whitening and brightening finished cloth, particularly common in the case of flax.

Words found in glossaries listing textile implements include some tools which may be related to textile finishing, including tœbere and teltreo. Both words correspond to the Latin lemma clavus, and teltreo is related to teldtreow or “tent peg.” Were these the pegs used to stretch the finished cloth into shape? Another textile tool which may have had a similar function is webhöc. In its component elements, webhöc means “weaving-hook.” During the later Middle Ages, wool cloth (which tended to shrink during the fulling process) was attached to tenterframes by hooks, and the Old English term may be an early name for the frame hooks.

After initial cleaning and stretching, the fabric would be dyed, although dyeing could take place while the thread or yarn was in a skein. A number of dyes seem to have been available to the Anglo-Saxons, including madder (red), woad (blue), various yellows and greens from native plants, imported kermes (scarlet), and possibly imported lichen (purple), as the garments and seed samples illustrate at 16-22 Coppergate. Other finds of woad seeds, the existence of both madder and woad in the fabrics at Sutton Hoo, and the presence of both dyes along with lichen purple in ninth to eleventh-century finds at Milk Street, London, provide more archaeological evidence of the use of these dyes among the Anglo-Saxons. The Maaseik, Durham, and Bayeux embroideries (to be discussed
Shortly) contain a range of brilliant colors which clearly indicate Anglo-Saxons had access to a variety of dyes and colored fabrics. In their natural tones, the wool fibers could also range from soft white to brown and black, and a creative weaver could use these to design beautiful patterns. Linen, however, was more often bleached to provide cloth for inner garments or backing cloth such as that of the Bayeux tapestry.\textsuperscript{134}

Written sources mention a variety of dyes. In a letter (c. 675) from Aldhelm to Wihtfrid, for example, Aldhelm admonishes his disciple to “avoid garments dyed with purple.”\textsuperscript{135} This purple probably refers to the imported dye which Bede describes as “se weolocreada tælgh” (“the murex-red dye”) extracted from the shell-fish murex, a dye particularly prized because “ne mæg sunne blæcan ne ne regn wyrdan; ac swa he bīp yldra, swa he fægerra bīp” (“neither can the sun bleach nor the rain destroy it; but as it ages, it becomes more beautiful”).\textsuperscript{136} In Bede’s \textit{Life of St. Cuthbert} (c. 721), “Bede refers to the fact that the monks of the saint’s own monastery still continued to follow his example by not wearing garments ‘of a costly colour’” meaning purple.\textsuperscript{137} Bede also mentions a beautiful scarlet dye native to England used in dyeing vestments. In another letter written in 747, Boniface “attacked ‘youths in purple garments’ who were actually in monasteries, and more specifically speaks of ‘their wide embroidered purple stripes.’”\textsuperscript{138} Aldhelm also indicates the popularity of rich colors among seculars.\textsuperscript{139} Moreover, a “tenth-century poet quoted by William of Malmesbury allude[s] to the scarlet cloak worn by King Athelstan.”\textsuperscript{140}

In the final stages of finishing, the cloth would be sewn into the desired article and possibly finished with borders and the excellent embroidery for which Anglo-Saxon
culture was world-famous. Finished borders were largely braids or tablet-woven fabrics. Tablet weaving involves weaving dense, narrow fabrics on a series of tablets with holes in them. Such weaving is a natural complement to weaving on the warp-weighted loom, since the borders can be tablet-woven right onto the fabric on the larger loom, or alternately, sewn onto the finished product. The finished border was strong and usually highly decorative with designs in a variety of colors and sometimes gold thread (in richer finds). The materials could range from wool, such as the borders on fabrics at Sutton Hoo and Blewburton Hill, Berkshire,\textsuperscript{141} to silk, as in the examples of ecclesiastical vestments to follow. Tablet-woven materials seem to have been quite common, according to the archaeological record; by 1967, tablet-woven articles had been discovered at over 20 Anglo-Saxon archaeological sites.\textsuperscript{142} Many of these braids would have formed the upper borders of tunics: “In innumerable cases, the pins of brooches placed at women’s shoulders are found to penetrate tablet weaving, which evidently formed the edge of a woman’s gown.”\textsuperscript{143}

It is more difficult to determine if the borders of gold mentioned in lists of donated vestments mean tablet-woven borders, but it seems likely. Finely woven golden borders are described attached to two copes from Cnut’s queen as well as one from St. Æthelwold to Ely.\textsuperscript{144} Those who were present at the transfer of St. Cuthbert’s body to a new grave in 1104 described the thick borders at the bottom, neck, and sleeves of his clothing which were encrusted with gold thread woven into them. These are very likely to have been tablet-woven. One of the chroniclers, Reginald of Durham, stated that “because of the abundance of gold which is introduced into the woven fabric, it is not
easily bent back, and then it makes a crackling sound. This border extends in width to the measure of a man’s palm, and its workmanship is seen to have been very painstaking and skilful. The neck border is described as even wider. Old English words for borders include *fæs, fnæd, gefnæd*, and *wlo并且.* Abundant pictorial evidence in manuscripts shows borders and hems, some gold in color. However, from the figures on the Bayeux Tapestry to the Old English Hexateuch and other manuscripts, most pictorial borders and bands are very plain (generally bands with dots) and clearly stylized, probably a symbolic “shorthand for elaborate.”

But by far the finest finishing of fabric among the Anglo-Saxons was embroidery. Ample archaeological evidence exists in the form of tools and cloth demonstrating the ability of the Anglo-Saxons to sew and embroider. Needles of bone, iron, and bronze and associated bronze needle or thread boxes abound in grave and settlement sites, most dating from the sixth and seventh centuries in predominantly West Saxon areas, but also Anglian eighth- to ninth-century finds such as 46-54 Fishergate and tenth- to eleventh-century Anglo-Scandinavian 16-22 Coppergate at York. *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* lists tools used in the final processes of textile preparation, including *presse, nædle*, and possibly *seamsticcan* (15.1). The term *presse* is a *hapax legomenon* and an apparent early borrowing from French which means some type of cloth press. The word for “needle” is much more common and appears often in the corpus. But *seamsticcan* is another *hapax legomenon* of uncertain meaning. Based on analysis of related Old English words and cognates, Poole guesses that *seamsticcan* is some type of tool for unpicking seams or stitches, or even the warp from the loom upon the web’s
Verbs provide further evidence of the textile finishing process, such as *aseowan*, “to sew, stitch; *mid needle aseowed* glossing *pictus acu* ‘embroidered with a needle.’”154 Another word which alludes both to tablet-woven borders and embroidery of Anglo-Saxon garments is *borda*, defined as an “ornamental border” or the “art or act of embroidery.”155 However, surviving embroidered artifacts are the best evidence of Anglo-Saxon proficiency in the textile arts. These embroideries and the other products of the Anglo-Saxon women’s hands will be discussed in the following chapter.

Notes

Chapter 1


2. Figure 1A (2 pictures) is taken from Marta Hoffmann, *The Warp-Weighted Loom*, No. 14 of *Studia Norvegica* (Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1964) 293, 295.


4. Nicola S. H. Rogers, *Anglian and Other Finds from Fishergate*, The Archaeology of York: The Small Finds Ser. 17.9 (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1993) 1266. Although the site at 16-22 Coppergate represents Viking York, Penelope Walton states that “very few of the textiles show any distinct Scandinavian influence and the majority quite easily fit into the general pattern of Anglo-Saxon textiles . . . the better-quality fabrics . . . appear to belong to the Anglo-Saxon/continental weaving tradition rather than


10. Generally, I will use the spelling of each Old English term as it appears in source texts and will not convert it to nominative case (if it appears in another case) nor normalize its spelling. Variant spellings will be noted. All translations in the text and notes of each chapter are mine unless otherwise noted.


12. Poole 471.


14. Poole 471.


16. Poole 472.

17. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.), a temple is “a contrivance for keeping cloth stretched to its proper width in the loom during the process of weaving,”
and in particular, “In the hand-loom, a pair of flat rods, having toothed ends which caught the selvedge on each side” (s.v. *temple*). The first date listed for this definition is 1483.


25. Concordance, s.v. hweorfa.


27. Concordance, also s.v. riul.

28. Concordance, s.vv. garmwinda, gearnuinide, gearnwindan, gearnwende, gernwinde.


30. Poole 471.

31. Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 294.


34. Poole 472.

35. Poole 475-78. Gale Owen-Crocker points out that the Romans (and possibly the Anglo-Saxons) used a crank-rod of some kind to wind the web onto the top beam of the loom; see Dress in Anglo-Saxon England (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986) 181.

37. Poole 477.


41. Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 313, 375 n. 10.

42. Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 271.

43. The term loma or geloman exists in Old English, but it seems to refer to a generic “tool” rather than the Modern English “loom” (Bosworth and Toller, s.vv.).

44. Concordance, also s.v. wearpe.

45. Concordance, also s.vv. wefta, weftan, wefte, wifte.

46. Concordance, s.vv. uela, weft, wesle.

47. Concordance, s.vv. wefla, weftan, weslum.


49. Poole 472.

50. Concordance, see also s.vv. hrisl, hrisle, hrislum, risel, rislum.


52. Poole 472.


54. Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 314.

55. Bosworth and Toller, s.v.

56. Concordance, also s.vv. hebeld, hebild, heueldum, heuelda, helfela, helfelm.

58. *Concordance*, s.v.

59. *Concordance*, s.v. *hebild*.

60. Bosworth and Toller II.527, s.v. *hefeld*.

61. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *hefeldgyrd*.

62. *Concordance*, s.vv.


64. *Concordance*, s.vv.

65. Glare, s.v.


68. Gatch 245.


70. Poole 475.

71. *Concordance*, s.v. *scatus* or *scaphus*.

72. Glare, s.v.

73. *Concordance*, s.vv.

74. Glare, s.v.

75. Wilson, “Craft” 273.

76. Poole 471.
77. Wilson, “Craft” 273; Poole 471.

78. Poole 471.

79. Concordance, s.v.

80. Poole 471.


82. Concordance, also s.v. webbeamas.


84. Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 336.

85. Crowfoot, Pritchard, and Staniland 22.

86. Concordance, s.vv.

87. Bosworth and Toller I.676, s.v.

88. Bosworth and Toller II.634, s.v.

89. Bosworth and Toller, s.v.


92. Hawkes quoted in Wilson. “Craft” 272. It is probably important to note that most surviving sword beaters of iron come from Kentish contexts; see Owen-Crocker, Dress 58.
93. Rogers 1269.

94. Fisher, “Fitting Place.”

95. Walton 412.


97. Bosworth and Toller, s.v.

98. Poole 472.

99. Concordance, also s.vv. pihtine, pectine.

100. Glare, s.v. pecten.

101. Concordance, s.vv.

102. Dictionary of Old English, Fascicle A, s.v.

103. von Erhardt-Siebold’s solutions for Riddles #35 and 56 agree with those suggested by Krapp and Dobbie in The Exeter Book (340, 350) and Craig Williamson, The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book (Chapel Hill, N.C.: UP North Carolina, 1977) 243. Her solution for #70 does not. Krapp and Dobbie favor the solution “harp” (369) and Williamson “lyre” (336). Williamson considers von Erhardt-Siebold’s explanation as “ingenious,” but he remains unconvinced that the imagery points to a shuttle, and he also argues that the riddle should be considered two fragments of separate riddles (the first ending after line four) (337-38). While the emendation required to unite the “fragments” is problematic and the “fragments” probably do not belong together, from a textile perspective, the first fragment’s imagery justifies von Erhardt-Siebold’s reading “shuttle,” even though her reading does not negate other possible interpretations.
104. The riddle in question is based upon a Latin riddle by the Anglo-Saxon Aldhelm, who was very probably describing an Anglo-Saxon warp-weighted loom.

105. von Erhardt-Siebold 15.

106. von Erhardt-Siebold 15.


108. von Erhardt-Siebold 16.


110. Williamson 336.

111. Williamson also objects to the standing web (presumably standing on a loom) suggested in von Erhardt-Siebold’s interpretation of the last lines, arguing that the loom could not be “heah” ("high") standing “be wege” (“by the way") (338). This objection to a “high” loom is most likely incorrect. Archaeological evidence based on the location of loom post holes suggests that warp-weighted looms may have rested against roof beams, indicating that the loom could be quite tall. The surviving Scandinavian warp-weighted looms of this and the previous century also reach 175-220 centimeters (roughly 5'10” to 7'4") on average (Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 24-29, 57-62, 118-19). The warp-weighted loom is generally constructed to be tall so that weavers can avoid having to reset the loom weights attached to the bottom of the web too many times as the woven section of the warp is rolled upwards onto the beam. If the two fragments belong together, then von Erhardt-Siebold’s interpretation of the last two lines is a valid one.

113. The Latin reads: “Alii dicunt funem triplicem uel quod subtus texitur, non sursum, ut nos telam teximus” (Bischoff and Lapidge 322-23, #100).


115. Bischoff and Lapidge 454. Lapidge indicates in the preface to the work that he is the sole author of the notes to the text (viii).


117. Bischoff and Lapidge 455.

118. Wilson, “Craft” 272.


120. Owen, “Wynflæd’s” 209. Scholars presume that the broken patterned twills were luxury weaves because they are generally found as weaves of finer fabrics (211, n.1).


122. Walton 415.

123. Hoffmann, Warp-Weighted 246.


125. Hodges 145.

126. Rogers 1273.


128. Walton 412.

vols. (London: King’s College London, Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1995) I.222. Most terms for “fuller” are grammatically masculine, which is reasonable given that fulling seems to have been one of the only stages of textile production for which men were predominantly responsible.


132. Bosworth and Toller, s. vv.


134. Walton 400-05.

135. Dodwell 36.

136. Bede I.1, p. 27, ll. 10-12.

137. Dodwell 36.

138. Dodwell 36.

139. Dodwell 37.

140. Dodwell 37.


143. Owen-Crocker, “Bands.”

144. Dodwell 180.

However, Battiscombe notes that Edward G. Pace is the translator of the passage in question.

146. Bosworth and Toller, s.v.v.


148. There is some question about the identification of the ‘thread box,’ a “tapering bronze cylinder open at both ends with a ring through the top,” for various reasons, particularly since the object may be talismanic and because the cylinder, while found with needles and thread and swatches of cloth and herb within, is open-ended; Sonia Chadwick postulates that a leather sheath could have rendered the boxes usable as thread or needle boxes, based on a find in Bedfordshire (36).


150. Chadwick 35.

151. Rogers 1271.

152. Poole 473.

153. Poole 475.


Chapter 2: The Material Culture of Anglo-Saxon Textiles: The Products

The products of Anglo-Saxon textile production included articles as diverse as linen shifts and elaborately embroidered vestments. The larger textiles which remain are those most valuable, the elaborately embroidered vestments and hangings of the period. These will be discussed first. Discussion of other varieties of textiles will follow.

EMBROIDERY

The sophistication of Anglo-Saxon embroidery ranged from a few stitches on a reliquary pouch from York to the elaborate couched embroidery completely covering the Durham vestments. Similarly, the costliness of materials ranged from wool thread on the linen background of the Bayeux Tapestry to the silk base cloth and silk embroidery thread encased in gold of surviving vestments and borders. The most famous and luxurious vestments of Anglo-Saxon manufacture were known for their use of the costliest material, gold-wrapped embroidery thread. The gold thread represents a great investment and expense in time and materials; each metallised thread was wrapped in “narrow strips cut from gold foil” of paper-thinness.1 The strips run from “less than 0.5 mm (Taplow) up to 2 mm. (Faversham)” in width, according to archaeological finds.2

Once set in place on the backing fabric by the embroideress’ skill, the gold thread was flattened with a mallet or other instrument for a burnished gloss. In most finds, the gold seems to have been remarkably pure and still retains a gleaming surface.3 The skilled combination of Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths and embroiderers in creating and working with fine gold represents a tradition of metallised textiles within Western Europe “that can be traced back further than any other,” and it marks the beginning of the great
tradition of trade in the beautiful, world-famous opus anglicanum referred to in prose sources.4

Anglo-Saxon embroidery incorporated silk or woollen threads in a variety of rich colors as well as metallised thread. The earliest examples of Anglo-Saxon embroidery are “scraps of wool twill decorated with coloured embroidery found . . . in amuletic boxes from seventh-century graves, such as those at Kempston in Bedfordshire.”5 Some of the remaining wool scraps from the pagan period are decorated with interesting patterns, such as a belt possibly embroidered with geometric patterns, what may have been embroidery on checked cloth with “leaf scroll in stem and satin stitches,” and “the remains of an interlace design in red, blue and yellow worked on a lozenge twill fabric which may have been dark brown.”6 The more complete ecclesiastical vestments which remain, however, demonstrate a great deal more about the colors, methods, and designs available to an Anglo-Saxon embroiderer.

Vestments

The Anglo-Saxon casula and velamen at Maaseik, Belgium, have survived relatively well and give a magnificent account of the abilities of Anglo-Saxon embroiderers. They are comprised of several fragments of cloth including textiles which “originated in southern England and date from the late eighth century or the early ninth.”7 In Anglo-Saxon Art, David Wilson describes the densely worked embroidery of both pieces:

The embroidered strips from the casula are decorated with arcades or roundels which contain animals, plant and interlace ornament, at the ends
of which are monograms. All the embroidery is worked in gold and silk on a linen backing cloth . . . the earliest known examples of opus anglicanum. The velamen . . . consists mostly of tablet braids embellished with blue and green glass beads, pearls and gilded copper-alloy bosses.\textsuperscript{8}

Although both artifacts are comprised of many pieces of embroidery, they "clearly form a set. They are the products of a single workshop, even if some parts may have been worked by different hands."\textsuperscript{9} The once brilliant colors of the silk threads in the embroideries include red, beige, green, yellow, light blue, and dark blue, as well as gold-wrapped thread.\textsuperscript{10} Originally, the dense embroidery covered the entire surface of the cloth. Most of the pearls or beads which "formerly adorned the embroideries" as well were removed at some point.\textsuperscript{11} It is not difficult to imagine the wonder the set of vestments would have elicited, with its richly hued, golden and pearl-adorned splendor.

The ornament and design of the Maaseik embroideries find "close stylistic parallels . . . to works of art in other media—carvings in stone, bone and ivory, decorated metal-work, and above all, manuscripts."\textsuperscript{12} The parallels of design in manuscripts such as the Berberini Gospels, Vespasian Psalter, the Codex Aureus, the Leningrad Gospels, the Book of Kells, and particularly the Canterbury Bible,\textsuperscript{13} as well as carvings, suggest the artificiality of our separation of the fine arts: "The coloured backgrounds of the embroideries resemble some manuscript decoration and the original effect of some stone carvings when painted. In having surfaces densely packed with ornament the embroideries match carvings, metal-work and certain parts of manuscripts, such as the
'carpet pages' and initial pages in the Book of Kells” or the Lindisfarne Gospels. Productive interrelationships among goldsmiths, painters, and textile technicians are easy to imagine, since, for instance, embroiderers relied upon goldsmiths for their metallised threads. In addition, there is every indication that, “the embroidery workshops inevitably relied on painters to provide their designs,” or at least to provide outlines which would have to be adapted to the medium of embroidery. In the case of the Maaseik embroideries, there is evidence of some form of transfer of design onto the backing, rather than “free-form” embroidery: designs were “first laid out on the backing cloth with single outlines of stitching in silk thread,” either red or beige.

Other remnants of the fine embroidery of the Anglo-Saxons include a stole and two maniple fragments (or a maniple and girdle) left by Athelstan in 934 at the shrine of St. Cuthbert in Durham. The vestments were worked between 909 and 916 by order of Ælfflaed, one of Edward the Elder’s wives and Athelstan’s step-mother (as information sewn obligingly into the works themselves indicates). A written source confirms what archaeology has uncovered, “The rich gifts listed in the Historia de Sancto Cuthberto include unam stolam cum manipulo (a stole and maniple) and a cingulum (girdle).” The fragments depict several Old Testament prophets and Christian symbols within their designs. Like the Maaseik embroideries, the Durham fabrics are “thickly, but delicately, embroidered in silk threads.” The three textiles have a red silk background with the gold-wrapped thread characteristic of Anglo-Saxon embroidery alongside stitches of many other colors. The finished gold sections show signs of having been flattened, and they still have a burnished sheen. Moreover, tablet-woven braids created entirely of silk
and gold, with some "brocading in silver-gilt thread" are sewn over the edges of lining and embroidery.\textsuperscript{20} Like the embroideries, the work on the tablet-woven borders is very minute, executed with similar materials and techniques, and is therefore probably contemporary.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, the similarity of patterns decorating the border bands suggests that the bands may have been woven to match both the design and the splendor of the embroideries. A. G. I. Christie describes the beautiful coloring of the silk thread alongside the gold:

Draperies were coloured purple-red and green, both tints occurring on the same vestment. Hair, usually worked in fawn striped with purple-red and green, was sometimes executed in blue and white lines. Faces were pale fawn, with the features outlined in a deeper tint. Some of the foliage was in purple-red, pink and sage green, a line of each colour being worked in succession. . . . The letters . . . were in either myrtle green or pale purple-red. . . . These colours have now perished, and the embroidery is of a warm brown tint which varies slightly in depth in different parts of the design.\textsuperscript{22}

The stitching of the Durham vestments is characterized by "extreme fineness" and "regularity."\textsuperscript{23} The technique used in their embroidery and construction indicates two interesting possibilities that help in reconstructing how embroiderers worked: first, like the Maaseik embroiderers, the Durham embroiderers seem to have used the ground material as a guide, perhaps following a painted or stitched guide, and second, parts of the stole and maniple, like many medieval manuscripts, were constructed in sections,
possibly indicating their creation in a workshop of ecclesiastical or secular embroiderers under Ælfflæd’s direction or patronage. Also like the Maaseik embroideries, the Durham vestments can be aligned artistically with a regional style, the Winchester, particularly given their parallels to a wall-painting in Winchester and to later manuscripts associated with the Winchester school.

Without a doubt, the Durham vestments represent the most elegant, sumptuous, and skilled products which remain as a witness to the abilities of Anglo-Saxon embroiderers. In fact, “They are the most beautifully designed and technically sophisticated work of Western European textile art surviving from this period.” Christie summarizes:

Their extraordinary beauty and delicate execution reveal what exquisite needlework was being produced in England before the Norman invasion; for such masterly achievement can only be accounted for by presuming a previous long-standing tradition of fine needlework. It can scarcely be doubted that the Norman conquest was a disaster to Anglo-Saxon art; the existing embroideries of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, although interesting, show a distinct decline in ability when compared with earlier work.

A third fragment of Anglo-Saxon embroidery is found in Milan at St. Ambrogia. This fragment is particularly interesting because it “seems to bear the closest resemblance in every detail to the Cuthbert couching.” The fragment is a strip 38 cm by 38 mm with gold, couched embroidery of strips of pure gold wrapped around madder red.
silk thread. The embroidery is so fine that it can be confused for the woven warp of a textile. In both materials and technique, the fragment is “identical” to the Durham vestments. No other information exists to suggest how the fragment reached Milan or exactly how it is related to the Durham vestments. The evidence available certainly suggests the Milan fragment was worked in the same workshop or by the same hands as the Durham vestments.

Many written sources refer to the great work of producing vestments for religious houses. Goscelin describes a late tenth-century oratory at Wilton, which ecclesiasts, in an effort to recreate a church worthy of the temple of Solomon, decorated with lavish display. He recounts the fine work of one nun in making and embroidering vestments “of purple and reddish purple and twice dyed scarlet interwoven with gold.” The same writer describes one work of St. Edith, an alb “embroidered with gold, jewels, pearls and little English pearls at the top . . . Around the hem were golden figures of the apostles standing around the Lord . . . while she prostrated herself in the role of the suppliant Mary.”

Written sources also indicate that the few vestments surviving to the present, while representative in quality, are certainly not representative in quantity. C. R. Dodwell enumerates many of the elaborate garments to which written sources attest,

The tenth-century chasuble of St Oswald preserved at Beverley was described as being of purple and glittering in its ancient beauty with gold and gems; a chasuble of the best purpura, given by Leofric to Peterborough, was adorned with gold and jewels; and one presented to
Abingdon by Bishop Siweard of Rochester was dazzling white, embellished with gold. From Bishop Brihtwold Glastonbury received as many as ten copes enhanced with gold and precious stones; and Waltham was enriched by Earl Harold with a wealth of vestments . . . adorned with gold and pearls.  

Even after the Norman raids of precious vestments following the Conquest, Ely numbered "twenty-two chasubles, four copes, three dalmatics and tunicles, fifty-one albs, forty-seven amices, and fifteen stoles and maniples." The production of such elaborate textiles in the great quantities which written sources attest is remarkable.

*Hangings*

The only other sizeable, remaining piece of textile art produced in the Anglo-Saxon period is the famed Bayeux Tapestry. In actuality, the term "tapestry" as we understand it does not apply to the Bayeux Tapestry at all; the "tapestry" is actually a series of joined, bleached linen panels over 230 feet long embroidered in wool in a spectrum of colors. The subject matter of the work, Harold II in his steps toward defeat by William the Conqueror, suggests a probable provenance and date of execution: "It was commissioned by William the Conqueror's half brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux and executed between 1073 and 1083." The work is almost certainly Anglo-Saxon, since names appear consistently in Old English within the inscriptions. Moreover, Anglo-Saxon women's remarkably coincidental qualifications as embroiderers renowned for their ability to execute such a project make an Anglo-Saxon provenance for the hanging rather probable. Its further similarity to Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the period leads
David Wilson to state, "it was almost certainly made in Canterbury in the Anglo-Saxon style."\textsuperscript{38}

Unlike the vestments discussed previously, the Bayeux Tapestry is made of common wool and linen. And yet, the patterns and decorations executed throughout the embroidery are striking, colorful, and interesting. Its borders are decorated with birds, monsters, leaves, scrolls, and subnarrative moments. The variety of colors within the embroidery include terracotta red, blue-green, sage-green, buff, blue, darker green, yellow, and a dark blue.\textsuperscript{39} The embroiderers used a technique called "laid and couched work" in which threads are packed into outlines and stitched over at right angles. George Digby explains, "Laid and couched work is an effective method for covering large surfaces, but it is used in this embroidery with particular skill."\textsuperscript{40} The bright colors of the embroidered wool and the strong outlines of the embroiderers make for striking work with "626 human figures, 190 horses or mules, 35 hounds or dogs, 506 various other animals, 37 ships, 33 buildings, 37 trees or groups of trees."\textsuperscript{41}

How so great a work was produced is probably very similar to how the vestments were each executed. The embroidery is probably based on a hand-drawn design later transferred to the backing fabric, which could be basted together for tracing and then separated for different hands to embroider the whole.\textsuperscript{42} In the case of the Bayeux Tapestry, as well as the vestments, the master designer may have been male or female, but "It is also likely, considering what we know of other embroideries from the Anglo-Saxon world, that the stitching was done by women, either lay or clerical."\textsuperscript{43}

In many ways, it is ironic that the Bayeux Tapestry is a lone survivor to an
extensive tradition of hangings. Since a good number of the hangings listed in written sources seem embroidered or tapestry-woven with as rich materials as surviving vestments. For example, among the few direct references to textiles in "Beowulf" is a description of the exquisite woven wall-hangings decorating Heorot: "Goldfag scinon / web æfter wagum, wundorsiona fela / secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc starað" ("Woven works along the walls shone gold-adorned, many a wonderful sight to each man who looks on such things") (994b-996). The gold-wrapped embroidery required to achieve this effect is not hard to imagine from its use in surviving ecclesiastical vestments. More dateable references to wall-hangings begin as early as the seventh century; King Oswald was said to have "a gold-enriched banner" and also to have donated several wall-hangings to churches he had aided in founding. Dodwell states, "The practice [of offering hangings] continued throughout the Anglo-Saxon period and is particularly well documented in its last centuries." King Athelstan offered "tapestries and hangings to the church at Chester-le-Street in the first half of the tenth century" and Oswald, archbishop of York, contributed "hangings and tapestries to Ramsey in the second half."

Another hanging of some fame is the Byrhtnoth tapestry or embroidery of the late tenth century described by the Liber Eliensis (completed c. 1170). The writer mentions that upon the death of Byrhtnoth (of "Battle of Maldon" fame), Byrhtnoth's wife, Lady Ælfflæd, donated "'cortinam gestis viri sui intextam atque depositam, depictam in memoriam probitatis eius' (a hanging embroidered [or woven] and figured [or painted or embroidered] with the deeds of her husband)" to the monastery at Ely. It is impossible
to be sure of the form of the ornament on the hanging, whether it involved embroidered or woven or even painted decoration. But, "if the compiler used his terms consistently--intextam denotes a form of needlework rather than weaving, as was apparently the case with the textiles auro et gemmis intextum 'embroidered [or woven] with gold and gems' or pretioso opere auri et gemmarum contextis 'woven with costly work of gold and gems' given respectively by Queen Emma and by Byrhtnoth himself."9 Moreover, since the wall-hanging has none of the usual adjectives describing gold and gem-adorned fabrics, perhaps it was more like the plain, wool-embroidered narrative of the Bayeux Tapestry. Indeed, the idea for that tapestry might have come from a glimpse of the deeds of Byrhtnoth depicted at Ely, which Odo and other Normans would probably have seen.

Records at Ely in 1081 confirm that great quantities of richly adorned hangings still remained in the possession of the monastery--"richly ornamented coverings, silk draperies and fine and costly hangings, which had no superior in all that area around . . . for the whole set seemed to be covered with gold."50 The annals list "two gold ones, forty-three others, thirty curtains and four tapestries."51 While it is unclear whether or not the hangings referred to included pictured silks imported from elsewhere, Anglo-Saxon embroideries, or tapestry-woven hangings, the profusion of hangings, like vestments, indicates the ability of Anglo-Saxons to produce great quantities of excellent and elaborate textiles.

Hangings were used in homes as well as churches, and each probably varied in size. In the hall of one noble, the hanging seems to have been quite large: in 1016, the assassins of Earl Uhtred hid behind a hanging in the hall in order to surprise the earl and
his forty men. Since they succeeded, the hanging must have hidden a good number of men.\textsuperscript{52} Another type of figured hanging mentioned in written sources is the embroidered sail. Dodwell notes that, "the Confessor had a ship whose sails were embroidered in gold with illustrations of the great sea-battles of the Anglo-Saxon kings,"\textsuperscript{53} a sail described in a poem inserted into William of Malmesbury’s life of the Confessor,

\begin{verbatim}
Nobilis appensum       preciatur purpura velum,
quod patrum series    depicta docet uarias res,
bellaque nobilium     turbata per equora regum.
Antemne grauidus      stipes roburque uolatus
sustinet, extensis    auro rutilantibus alis\textsuperscript{54}
\end{verbatim}

King Harold also had a banner “on which the figure of a warrior was ‘interwoven lavishly and skillfully with gold and jewels.’”\textsuperscript{55} Clearly, the one hanging which remains, as impressive as it is, is only a token of the wealth of textile hangings produced in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Considering the beauty and excellence of the embroideries which survive, as well as their apparent initial abundance, one might wonder why so few survive. Besides the obvious ravages of time, “The intrinsic value of the materials used in embroideries was a common cause of their destruction”; vestments and other precious textiles were later burned for their gold or picked apart for gems and pearls.\textsuperscript{56} Religious persecution of later times also “resulted in the deliberate destruction of many fine medieval embroideries.”\textsuperscript{57} The wonder is that any textiles remain to testify to the excellence of the Anglo-Saxon textile tradition.
Although few recognizable artifacts remain which attest to the everyday use of textiles in a household, written sources fill the gap to some extent. Every surface of even modest Anglo-Saxon homes seems to have been covered with textiles, with hangings on the walls, curtains on bed frames, seat covers on benches and chairs, coverings on beds and chests, and occasionally covers on tables and rugs on the floor, all with the primary functions of both warming and brightening a home. As Dodwell states: “Fabrics adorned bare walls, floors, and furniture; and wall-hangings, carpets, seat-covers and other coverings recur in wills and inventories of gifts.”

A late testimony to this custom comes from Goscelin, a Norman who “came to England about 1058 and adopted local customs, he decked out the walls and seats of his poor lodgings with fabrics.” Since he could not afford rugs, Goscelin then placed green rushes on the floors to complete the colorful effect.

Some insight into the range of household textiles comes from extant wills of Anglo-Saxon women, documents which tend to be rather specific about the disposal of textile goods. This specificity is probably the result of several factors. First, textiles seem to have belonged to the lady of the house and were thus hers to name and bequeath specifically. Moreover, as women were generally textile producers, they would be more likely to see levels of difference in textiles that others would not. Finally, if women spent more time in domestic settings than men, they would naturally be more familiar with the various textiles in use in a home.

In her will (written c. 980-90), Æthelgifu leaves her “betste wahrift” (“best wall-
hanging”) (7) and “betste setrægl” (“best seat-cover”) (7) to St. Albans for her and her husband’s souls, surely indicating the value of her bequest, or their souls are not worth much purchase. She also leaves many clues about the decoration, color, number, and even purpose of the textiles as she specifies which outfits and articles will go to whom: to Wulfwynn she leaves a wall-hanging, seat-cover, and her “rotostan cyrtel” (“brightest gown”) (45); to Beornwynn she leaves her “blæwenan cyrtel . . . neaðene unrenod / hire betstan heafodgæwæd” (“blue gown . . . unadorned at the bottom and her best head-dresses”) (47-48); to Lufetat, Ælgifu, and Godwif she leaves her “.iii. godwebbenan cyrtlas” (“three silk/purple gowns”) (48); to Wulfgifu she leaves just “oðera hire dunnan cyrtla” (“some of her other, dun-coloured gowns”) (48); and finally to Leofsige she leaves three of the best “wahrif” (“wall-hangings”) and two “setrægl” (“seat-covers”) (49). One interesting element is that the color of each article seems associated with its value to the owner, as well as the generally precious nature of textiles so that not even a dun headdress is left out of the bequests. The mention of multiple textiles presumably in use as wall and seat coverings in the household is also illuminating.

An equally interesting will is the tenth-century will of Wynflæd (extant in an eleventh-century copy) mentioned in Chapter 1. She leaves similar, specific textile descriptions of her household textiles. She leaves to Eadwold “an bedræf eal þæt to anum bedde gebyreð” (“one set of bed clothing, all that belongs to one bed”) (12, ll. 22-23). To the women of her household and family she leaves the majority of the textiles, including,

hydro twilibrocenan cyrtel, òperne linnenne oðde linnenweb, Eadgyfe twa
mydrecan, þærarin[an]an hyre bētspe bedwahrift, linnenne ruwan, eal þæt bedref þe þæerto gebyreð, hyre betstan dunnan tunecan, hyre beteran mentel... an lang healwahrift, ðeper sceort, þrio sethrægl, hio an Ceoldryþe hyre blacena tunecena swa þer hyre leofre beo, hyre bētsō haliryft, hyre bētsōan bindan [7, Æþelflæde þisse hwitan hyre cincdaðenan cyrtel, cuffian, bindan, ðinde Ædelflæd syþban an hyre nunscredre loc e hwæt hio bētsō mæge Wullflæde, Æþelgife (14, ll. 7-11, 13-18)

She also mentions “an lytulu towmyderce” (“a little spinning or weaving chest”) (14, l. 21) and “wahriftu sum þe hyre wyrðe bið, þa læstan hio mæg syllan hyre wimmannon” (“hangings, one which is dear to her, and the least she can give to her women”) (14, ll. 25-26).

As Æþelgifu’s will does, Wynflæd’s will indicates several common articles of clothing and ways of distinguishing valued garments by color and weave. Moreover, the variety of size and quantity of hangings she mentions, as well as her apparent supply of nun’s clothing, give a glimpse into the use and frequency of textiles within a wealthy Anglo-Saxon household. The will also alludes to what a bed-set might include: bed hangings, a linen covering (coverlet?), and other bed-clothing (sheets? pillows? a bolster?). The small spinning or weaving chest mentioned in the will is another oblique and fascinating reference to a whole culture of textile apparatus; could this small chest be a container for her spindle and more valuable whorls and threads?

The will of Wulfwaru (written between 984 and 1016) presents additional information about the quantity and types of textile “sets” available for a wealthy woman
to bequeath. To St. Peter's monastery at Bath, she leaves a grant "anes mæssecreafes mid eallum þam ðe ðæerto gebyreð. Þæs hricghrægles ðæs selestan þe ic hæbbe. Þæs beddrefafes mid wahryfte, mid hoppscytan. Þæs mæssecreafes mid eallum þam ðe ðæerto gebyreð" ("of a mass-vestment with all that belongs with it, and the best mantle that I have, and bed-clothing with a hanging and a curtain and with all that belongs with it") (62, ll. 20-23).

The reference to vestments in Wulfwaru's possession is particularly interesting. Was this perhaps her death offering, embroidery prepared against the day of her death? Her allusion to a set of bedroom textiles confirms information in Wynflæd's will. It includes bed-clothing, a hanging, and a curtain. In lay clothing, she leaves to one daughter a bequest "anes wifscrudes ealles" ("of a complete women's outfit") and to another a gift "ealles ðæs wifscrudes þe þer to lafe bið" ("of all of the women's clothing which is left") (64, ll. 11, 12-13).

To two sons, Wulfwaru leaves a bequest "anes heallwahriftes. Þæs beddrefafes" ("of a hall-hanging and some bed-clothing") and "anes heallrefafes. Þæs burrefafes, mid beodrefafes. Þæs hraeglum swa ðæerto gebyreð" ("of a hall-hanging and a bedroom-hanging, with a tablecloth, and with all the cloths which belong with it") (64, ll. 16, 17-10). Her household obviously contains several hangings, which are specified by room. What would differentiate a hall hanging from a bedroom hanging? Would size be an indicator for function? The reference to the tablecloth and accompanying cloths (probably napkins) is, in particular, an interesting image, given the common conception of the "Dark Ages." Nonetheless, such largesse would quite obviously be seen in lesser proportion down the social scale. It is unfortunate that we lack an example of the textile
comforts of the lowest classes for comparative purposes. As previously mentioned, Goscelin's claim that he lived in a hovel, but still decorated that hovel throughout with textiles, is interesting, if inconclusive. These Anglo-Saxon women's wills at least furnish an idea of what specific types of textiles would be found in one kind of Anglo-Saxon home.

*COSTUME*

For a full analysis and identification of articles of dress in their archaeological and textual contexts, I refer the reader to Gale Owen-Crocker's excellent work, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, which includes a very useful glossary of Old English words for clothing. In brief, Dodwell suggests that in the early Anglo-Saxon period, women wore a long, tube-like dress caught at the waist and shoulders, a blouse with long sleeves and "leather or woven cuffs" with a cloak over top, as well as some sort of head-dress. By the seventh-century conversion period, Anglo-Saxon dress showed more Mediterranean influence with a sleeved dress and a cloak or veil. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, women were wearing "ankle-length robes with wide sleeves, and a simple wimple-like head-dress which amply covers both head and shoulders." Men's dress seems unchanged from the early continental descriptions of Tacitus to the pictorial evidence of men's dress at the time of the Conquest; they wore a tunic and cloak whose length might vary, but whose basic design remained the same. Naturally, ceremonial robes of court and church would vary. Other garments made of non-textile material such as robes of furs and leather shoes were also in use.

As the women's wills indicate, everyday clothing of wool and linen could vary in
color, weave, and finishing. Certainly the silks and fine threads characteristic of
vestments and hangings would have been available for clothing, predominantly according
to social class. Ironically, it is primarily through the criticism by ecclesiastical leaders of
the fine clothing in use among the Anglo-Saxons that we have evidence of its existence.
Aldhelm criticizes the sumptuous clothing among the aristocratic people in his day near
the end of the seventh century:

In both sexes this kind of costume consists of a fine linen undergarment, a
red or blue tunic, a headdress and sleeves with silk borders; their shoes are
covered with red dyed leather; the locks on their foreheads and temples are
crimped by the curling iron; instead of dark head coverings they wear
white and coloured veils which hang down luxuriantly to the feet and are
held in place by vittae sewn on to them.69

In the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede also condemns luxurious
clothing among the Anglo-Saxons, but in this case among the nuns at Coldingham in the
late seventh and early eighth century. He recounts the destruction by fire of Coldingham
monastery and attributes it directly to the wickedness of its inhabitants, whose sins
include lust for glorious apparel. Apparently, “ða fæmnan, ða de Gode gehalgode wæron,
forhogdre are hearæ ondetnisse, ond swa oft swa hio æmtan habbað, þæt hio smaelo
hrægel weofað , wyrcað, mid ðæm hio oððo hio siolfe frætwað in bryda onlicnesse, in
frecenesse hiora stalles oððo utwæpnedmonna friondscipes him ceapiað” (“the virgins,
who were dedicated to God, forgetting the dignity of their profession, and as often as they
have leisure, weave and work fine clothing, with which they either adorn themselves like
brides, to the peril of their position, or purchase the friendship of lay men for themselves”). Similarly, “in 745. St. Boniface expressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury his concern at the ornamentation of habits in nunneries. This criticism was taken up at the Council of Cloveshoe in 747, which recommended that religious women should give their attention to reading and singing psalms rather than to decorating their habits in varied colours and for empty show.” The Blickling homilist likewise condemns the use of glorious garments: “Nu þu miht her geseon moldan dæl & wyrmes lafe, þær þu ær gesawe godweb mid golde gefagod” (“Now you may see here a portion of earth and the leavings of worms, where you saw before a fine cloth interwoven with gold”). The gold-wrapped thread and glorious materials in use for vestments clearly made their way into more secular usage, as well.

Such sumptuous garments were often donated and refashioned as vestments. Dodwell states, “A cloak that King Edgar gave to Ely, so laden with gold embroidery that it looked like chain mail, was made into a chasuble. The one he presented to Glastonbury was splendid enough to be used as an altar-cover.” The skills and products of Anglo-Saxon hands were probably far more appreciated by the clergy when dedicated to God, rather than to self. However, in the *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, William of Malmesbury relates a charming anecdote about St. Edith. When reproached by St. Ethelwold about her apparently elaborate clothing, Edith replied, “I think that a mind may be as pure beneath these vestments, as under your tattered furs,” and the bishop was “deeply struck by this speech, admitting its truth by his silence.”
WOMEN AND TEXTILES: THE LINK

Another “product” of the process of textile production among the Anglo-Saxons is the inevitable impact of that process on the role of the Anglo-Saxon woman. R. I. Page describes what scholars have long assumed as the Anglo-Saxon woman’s active role in society: “freewomen would be responsible for running households of some size, and this would involve directing servants, preparing stocks of food and supervising the work of the home, which would include baking, brewing, preserving, spinning and weaving.”

According to archaeological evidence, women’s place in the material culture of Anglo-Saxon textiles clearly matches Page’s description. The textiles and textile implements found on Anglo-Saxon sites have a striking feature in common: they are almost universally and uniformly located within a female’s grave. C. J. Arnold suggests that the range of items “buried as grave-goods may be symbolic of an individual’s role in society,” and he offers as his paradigmatic example the “pieces of weaving equipment in durable materials . . . found in richly accompanied women’s graves.” Thus, spinning and weaving implements buried with females symbolize their social roles as spinners and weavers. Christine Fell summarizes, “But clearly the regular presence of thread-boxes, spindle-whorls and weaving-batons in female graves indicates a strong link in the culture between women and cloth-production.”

Textual references certainly support the connection. Fell suggests a linguistic connection in the suffix -stere of Old English and its use in spinning and weaving contexts. Words associated with spinning and weaving often had this grammatically female ending, for example: spinster, seamster, webster, fullester (fuller), and dyster and
lister (dyers). While "It is obvious that as the grammatical forms of Old English came to be used with less precision these words would also describe men engaged in these occupations . . . . it is equally obvious that a group of words of this kind originally represented a connection between women and the various skills of cloth production."

The legal terminology of the Anglo-Saxons provides another linguistic connection between women and spinning and weaving. In the will of King Alfred, probably written between 883 and 888, Alfred mentions that he wishes to pass his inheritance along the male line, "on þa wæpnedhealfe" ("on the weapon-side [paternal]") or "on þa sperehealfe næs on þa spinlhealfe" ("on the spear-side and not the spindle-side [maternal]"), although he retains the right to give "wifhanda" ("to the woman-side") as much as "wæpnedhanda." What is fascinating about the reference is not simply that the spindle has become a symbol of the female line, but also that Alfred so clearly mentions it as a synonym for wifhanda that it does not require definition. How common was this legal term? It may reflect a long-standing Germanic terminology, since the first known legal reference to spear- and spindle-kin is the Thuringian law, "frequently invoked as somehow preserving more purely the old Germanic system." This metonymic identification of spindle for women or the matriarchal line suggests a long-standing tradition in Germanic and Anglo-Saxon cultures of identifying women with spinning and weaving.

Other references which tie textile production to women include Ælfric's glossary textbook which glosses Latin into Old English. When he glosses Latin words in the category "GENERIS FEMININI" ("about women"), he includes such phrases as "illa suit
heo siwađ” (“she sews”) and “illae nent lanam hig spinnad wulle” (“they spin wool”). Thus, some of the important Latin words and phrases concerning women to be glossed include textile terms. Other evidence linking women and textile work includes The Exeter Book Maxims I, which states “fæmne æt hyre bordan geriseð” (“a woman belongs at her embroidery”) (63b). The verses further indicate that a woman may lose her beauty and gain the contempt of men if she finds her place elsewhere. The “frysan wif” (“Frisian woman”) (95a) of Maxims I also has charge over textiles. When her husband returns from sea, one of her duties is maintaining textiles: “wæsceð his warig hraegl ond him syleþ wæde niwe” (“she washes his stained clothing and gives him new clothing”) (98).

The ultimate female ideal, the Virgin Mary, is herself praised above the other maidens at the temple for her exemplary virtue as she “sona godum towcæftum onfeng, swyðor þonne ænig þara þe heora bearn væron wifa and fæmnena” (“directly undertook good textile work, better than any of those who were born of women and maidens”). Moreover, she ruled herself such that she spent her time “fram þære þriddan tide ða nigoþan tid ymbe hyre webbgeweorc” (“from the third hour until the ninth at her weaving work”). How far real women varied from the cultural ideal suggested by archaeological and textual evidence can only be conjectured.

As the medieval period progressed, however, textile production lost its virtually exclusive connection to women. Because of the growing market for English textiles, men began taking over and industrializing the domestic textile industry in the later Middle Ages. A change in loom technology made such a transition to industrial textile production possible: the newly imported horizontal treadle loom greatly increased speed.
and productivity. Interestingly, the new technology, which swept across Europe, may have entcred along gendered lines; Rashi (1040-1105), who lived in Troyes and briefly in Germany, described two looms in use, "men weave with their feet, while women have a cane which moves up and down." In other words, the men used looms with treadles, while women used looms with heddles (such as the warp-weighted loom). Hoffmann confirms that warp-weighted looms probably continued in use through the eleventh and twelfth century in domestic contexts. Women maintained a role in the textile industry as embroideresses and spinsters.

However, the transition has no special importance in the context of Anglo-Saxon textiles and textile imagery, since the Anglo-Saxon period ends about the same time as this new technology: the middle of the eleventh century. The earliest references to male Anglo-Saxon "weavers" occur in the Exeter Manumissions, as "Alger se webba, Willelm se webba" act as witnesses, and in another section, Willelm de la Brugere names a lawsuit against "Wulwærd ðane webba." The manumissions, however, are dated as late eleventh or early twelfth century. This is not to deny the possibility that male slaves and free male weavers could have been found earlier in the period, but normally, textile production still seems to have been part of the woman's social role. As H. R. Loyn states in *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest*: "In primitive Germanic communities it is known that these tasks [spinning and weaving] were the women's; men to the plough, to the spear; woman to the spindle. To the end of the Anglo-Saxon period that may be taken as the ideal."
SOCIAL CLASS AND TEXTILES

While presumably all women would have collaborated in the endless draping of Anglo-Saxon society, it stands to reason that richer or higher status females would have adopted some textile projects impossible for slaves or lower class servants. Fell suggests:

The range of activities involved in cloth-making might up to a point have been distinguished by class, simple weaving and spinning presumably having few associations with status, whereas the production or elaboration of sophisticated textiles involving the use of more expensive materials would usually be carried out by those who had both the leisure and the money to devote to non-basic skills.\(^{93}\)

However, she adds that Anglo-Saxon society would probably not preserve the distinction with uniform rigidity, since the demand of each large community for textiles required a large labor force of both noble women and a number of trained textile servants.\(^ {94}\)

Archaeological evidence shedding light on the relationship between social class and textiles is rare. Some evidence of a correlation comes from finds of sword beaters. As previously mentioned, all extant iron sword beaters were placed in women’s graves, but all the women’s burials in question were very rich. A sword beater of iron would be a luxury item when wooden or bone beaters would be easier and less expensive to fashion. Indeed, the sword beater at Finglesham, Kent, is pattern-welded, which suggests that it is either a re-used sword blade or a very luxurious weaving item.\(^ {95}\) Sonia Chadwick suggests: “while their primary domestic function [as textile implements] is not in doubt, these rare iron weaving swords may have been, like the real swords they closely resemble,
a symbol of the rank and social status of their owner."96 She adds that three of the finds of weaving swords accompanied other highly symbolic status objects such as solid gold fillets, crystal balls, and spoons.97

A second, significant correlation may exist between the sword beater finds and finds of spindle whorls: "all finds of weaving battens except for the questionable Shudy Camps example are mutually exclusive with finds of spindle whorls. This distinction suggests that symbolically those who spun--spinsters--held a different role than women who wove."98 The distribution of other textile implements at West Stow suggests, moreover, that spinning "was universally practiced whereas weaving was restricted to only one or two groups of practitioners within the settlement."99 Practical knowledge of textile production may support such findings. Many hours of spinning are required to produce enough thread or yarn for weaving. Therefore, anyone in a household with less experience or strength, or perhaps status, would likely be pressed into service to fill the need. They would be characterized by spindle whorls. Weaving takes more strength and experience, as well as more complicated equipment, so the job would logically fall to the higher status females among workers in a household or a workshop.100

While there is no question that textile production occurred in the home throughout the period, textual evidence confirms that slaves and other workers participated in the production of textiles on larger estates. In Æthelgifu's tenth-century will, for example, she frees a male "fullere" (16). Similarly, in the tenth or eleventh-century will of Wynflæd, she mentions that "hio becwīð Eadgyfe ane crencestran , ane sem[estra]n" ("she bequeaths to Eadgyfu a female weaver and a seamstress") (10, l. 30). The existence
of slaves in textile workshops on estates suggests that what clearly began (and continued) as a cottage industry evolved to a communal and then trade industry over time. The creation of workshops probably first began to take place in religious houses and on larger estates. Archaeological evidence confirms their emergence: "[A workshop] may have existed close to the mid 9th to late 10th century manor at Goltfo, Lincolnshire, where pin-beaters and other textile tools have been found on the floor of a large outbuilding."101 A site at Upton (Northamptonshire) also appears to have contained a workshop, "...a weaving-shed containing two or more looms, benches and storage racks: a workshop, in fact, employing several persons."102 Moreover, as mentioned previously, some sections of the vestments as well as the Bayeux Tapestry suggest execution in a workshop on an estate or in a monastery.

Textual evidence also supports the existence of textile workshops. In explaining Aldhelm's use of textile imagery in his treatise on virginity, Dodwell states, "there was clearly a tradition of needlework in nunneries from very early times."103 The influence of Alcuin of York, the great Northumbrian scholar at Charlemagne's court in the late eighth and early ninth century, may also have been felt, as Edward the Elder's imitation of his example probably indicates. Alcuin was responsible for the famed Palace School at Aachen, which included "embroidery workshops for the design, construction and decoration of liturgical, royal and imperial vestments."104 William of Malmesbury states that Edward "brought up his daughters in such wise, that in childhood they gave their whole attention to literature, and afterwards employed themselves in the labours of the distaff and the needle, that thus they might chastely pass their virgin age."105 John Smith,
citing Fabian’s Chronicle as his source, relates that “it was remarked of this same King Edward, that being careful, as we may conceive, that his Children should have proper princely Education, ‘he sette his Sons to Scole, and his Doughters he sette to Woll werke, takyng Example of Charles the Conquestour.”[106] On the other hand, one might just as easily conjecture that Alcuin may have seen the idea already in operation in monasteries and noble households in northern England and imported the idea to Charlemagne’s court.

Glossarial evidence for textile workshops includes two related terms, the first, *webhus* glossing *textrina*, “A place where weaving is carried on,”[107] and the second, *towhus of wulle* glossing *genitium*, from *gynaeceum*, “The women’s quarters in a Greek house.”[108] The second Latin term is of further interest since Alcuin’s workshop in which women worked textiles is also described as *gynacea*.[109] Both Old English terms may be nothing more than words formed to translate a Latin idea, although it is possible that they designate similar facilities set aside for textile work (which also happened to be linked to women) which existed among the Anglo-Saxons as well as the Romans and Greeks.

William of Malmesbury records that St. Dunstan (924-88) designed embroideries for Æthelwynn in what seems to have been a private textile workshop: “a certain noble lady named Æthelwynn invited him privately on one occasion to pay her a visit, in order to draw various designs on an ecclesiastical stole which she proposed to embellish with embroidery in gold and precious stones”[11] and during the work, his harp, with which he entertained the lady during rest periods, began to sound itself, “and the aforesaid lady, and all her workwomen, were seized with dread and, altogether forgetful of the work in their hands, they stared.”[110] Dunstan’s visit offers a rare glimpse of both the
collaboration of a painter with textile artists and the existence of a textile workshop with female workers on a noblewoman’s estate.

Some lay women and religious communities seem to have created a reciprocal relationship based on land use which made possible the establishment of textile workshops. In the ninth century (802), Eanswitha, an embroideress at Hereford, “was granted by Denbert, Bishop of Worcester, a lease for life of a farm of two hundred acres, on condition that she was to renew and Scour, and from time to time add to, the dresses of the priests who served in the cathedral church.”111 Æthelswitha, daughter to Queen Ælfgifu (Emma) dedicated herself to textile production: “‘in retirement she devoted herself, with her maids, to gold embroidery. At her own cost, and with her own hands, being extremely skilled in the craft, she made a white chasuble.’”112 The Domesday Survey (1085) mentions other textile workers, including Ælfgyth, “who held land on condition that she taught Count Godric’s daughter to embroider, and Leviet [Leofgyth], who worked auriphrisium [gold embroidery] for the king and queen.”113 The evolution from private handicraft to trade workshop is easily traced in these examples and does much to explain how Anglo-Saxon women found time aside from other domestic duties to produce the wealth of richly-worked textiles apparent from pre- and post-Conquest inventories.

But economic reward alone cannot completely explain the establishment of workshops. Royal queens, who had little need for the land or privilege accorded other women for textile production, still produced lavish textiles for religious as well as royal purposes. For example, in the eleventh century, the Liber Eliensis records that Queen
Ælgifu (Emma) gave the church at Ely:

a purple banner she had made, surrounded on every side by a border of gold embroidery, and adorned with magnificent embroidery of gold and precious gems, as it were inlaid such that nowhere in England is there to be found any embroidery of equal craftsmanship and value, for her needlework seems to excel in worth even her materials. To each of our saints she offered a silk cloth embroidered with gold and gems, though of less value. She also made coverings for the altar, a large green pall strikingly adorned with gold plates, and above it a cloth of bissus of bright sanguine tint, with a border of gold embroidery, a foot broad, presenting a sight of great magnificence and value.¹¹⁴

Theodoric, confessor to another Anglo-Saxon queen, Margaret, wife to Malcolm III of Scotland (1045-95), described her textile workshop: “her chamber was like the workshop of a heavenly artist, there copes for singers, chasubles, stoles, altar cloths and other priestly vestments and church ornaments were always to be seen, some in course of preparation, others, worthy of admiration, already completed.”¹¹⁵

Their works suggest that material gain was not the sole motivation for creation of textile workshops; personal piety and a hope for heavenly reward must have also inspired noble women wealthy enough to produce such lavish textiles without temporal return. Moreover, the ideal woman of Anglo-Saxon culture, be she Mary or an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman such as Queen Emma, was one who executed superlative textile work. This ideal must also have exerted some form of pressure on women who wished to be
considered noble and virtuous. Certainly, textile art was one of the creative outlets afforded Anglo-Saxon women, one which allowed them to create some fame for themselves on earth as well as in heaven.

A FINAL MATERIAL PRODUCT

The ultimate product of the Anglo-Saxon textile process was the enduring fame and a lucrative trade that went with it. The earliest evidence in written sources about textile trade occurs in correspondence between Offa and Charlemagne. H. R. Loyn notes that the latter demonstrates anxiety in his letters that the "mantles imported into Frankia, the sages, should be of accustomed length." In fact, in his letter to Offa in 796 A.D., Charlemagne "stated that if the Mercians complained about the size of stones that were sent to them... then he in turn must complain about the length of the cloaks." Loyn continues, "The mention of cloaks from England is the first indication of the importance of English sheep and English wool; the anxiety of the statesmen concerned suggests that there is a significant trade involved." Loyn also mentions other eighth-century continental sources which refer to the trade in English textiles:

The Abbot of Wearmouth in 764 reported that he had sent two pallia of the most ingenious workmanship, the one plain and the other coloured... to the Bishop of Mainz; in 800 the Abbey of St Bertin reserved a portion of its revenue to buy English cloth... Paul the Deacon referred to the vestimenta linea, qualia Angli-Saxones habere solent ornata institis latoriibus vario colore contextis... Even the Moslem world knew of the reputation of the English cloth and from the ninth to the eleventh century...
many Arabic sources referred to its fame.\footnote{119}

Certainly the presence of eighth or ninth-century embroideries in Milan and Maaseik suggests that Anglo-Saxon textiles were making their way throughout the world.

Boniface’s correspondence with Bugga suggests another vehicle for dissemination of the fame of Anglo-Saxon textiles; Bugga writes to send Boniface an altarcloth (c. 720), and later (c. 738) he thanks her for the garments she has sent him.\footnote{120} The textiles that accompanied the Anglo-Saxon missionaries to the continent may have inadvertently provided advertising and a growing demand for the work of Anglo-Saxon hands.

By the ninth century, Anglo-Saxon textiles had made their way to Rome as well; the father of King Alfred, King Æthelwulf, presented St. Peter’s with “a gold-embroidered purple hanging and two other hangings” in 855.\footnote{121} The admiration of and demand for Anglo-Saxon textiles is well-attested in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Queen Ædith or Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, sent a French abbot, Gervin of Saint-Riquier, an amice (neck-covering) which he esteemed so greatly for its “extraordinary beauty’ and its ‘preciousness’” that he gave her two churches in exchange.\footnote{122} An Old French song about the life of Edward the Confessor indicates how widespread its author considers Edith’s fame based on her skill:

\begin{align*}
\text{Dunt oisez la fame espadre} & \quad \text{Whose fame you might hear spreading} \\
\text{D’Engleterre en Alisandre} & \quad \text{From England to Alexandria} \\
\text{D’entaille e de purtraiture,} & \quad \text{In engraving and porttraiture,} \\
\text{D’or et d’argent brudure} & \quad \text{In gold and silver embroidery}
\end{align*}
Tant fist verais propres et beaus She made so many true, appropriate and beautiful

U d’agoille u de taveus Either in needlework or patchwork

Hummes, oiseaux, bestes e fleurs Men, birds, beasts and flowers

E tant parti ben ses culurs, And so well did she divide her colours

E de autre overe riche e noble And in other rich and noble work

N’ont per gesk’en Constantinoble. She had no equal as far as Constantinople.\textsuperscript{123}

William of Malmesbury mirrors such praise, saying Edith embroidered even the king’s robe herself, and that it was, “interwoven with gold, which the queen had most splendidly embroidered.”\textsuperscript{124} Dodwell remarks that as a result of the personal and collective fame Anglo-Saxon women acquired through their textiles, Anglo-Saxon embroidery was so “much respected at home and admired abroad”\textsuperscript{125} that even the occasionally skeptical William of Poitiers lauded their ability and skill with “the needle and in weaving with gold.”\textsuperscript{126} Goscelin was more effusive as he praised “the English women for their skill in gold embroidery, and commented on how they embellished the garments of the princes of the church and of the princes of the realm with gold-work and gems and with English pearls that shone like stars against the gold.”\textsuperscript{127}

These Normans were not alone in their appreciation of Anglo-Saxon handiwork. Recipients of the spoils of textile wealth seized during the Conquest were most appreciative: “Even after the Conquest, Anglo-Saxon vestments continued to be sent
abroad as gifts of special distinction . . . Cluny received from [Queen Matilda] a chasuble so stiff with gold that it could hardly be bent, and from her husband, a cope practically covered with gold, gems, pearls and amber." 128 The reactions of the Anglo-Saxons’ neighbors and conquerors seem to indicate that their textile work was unique as well as spectacular. It appears to have been quite distinctive; during a visit to the Italian archbishop of Benevento, an Anglo-Saxon ecclesiast named Eadmer who lived at the time of the Conquest was able to recognize on sight that an ornate and highly prized cope at least 50 years old was of Anglo-Saxon origin, an estimate which local ecclesiasts confirmed. 129

The spoils of bequests and conquest continued to appear across continental Europe many years later. When Pope Eugenius III (twelfth century) received a cope as a gift, he was “struck with its worth and beauty,” and found upon inquiry that it was “a royal vestment presented to Ely by Emma, Canute’s queen.” 130 Although women probably continued to produce these great works of art after the Conquest, particularly nuns in convents, tradesmen began to take over the industry, benefitting greatly from the reputation of the Anglo-Saxon textile tradition, as papal inventories indicate: “By the time of the Papal inventory of 1295 Opus Anglicanum is mentioned more often than any other form of embroidered decoration in the vestments held in Rome by the Holy See.” 131 Until 1350, “when the depredations of the Black Death decimated the embroiderers,” the English embroidery which ultimately originated among Anglo-Saxon women “was the most admired and most sought after indigenous European textile artwork.” 132

Given the central place of textiles and their production within Anglo-Saxon
society, the importance of textile metaphors in Old English literature is not surprising. It is this metaphorical richness, itself a product of the textile process, to which I now turn.

Notes

Chapter 2

1. Crowfoot and Hawkes 43.
2. Crowfoot and Hawkes 43.
3. Crowfoot and Hawkes 44.
4. J. P. P. Higgins, Cloth of Gold: A History of Metallised Textiles (Dover, G. B.: Buckland Press, 1993) 22. Although some scholars do not consider the lavish gold embroidery of Anglo-Saxon manufacture true opus anglicanum (generally represented by later medieval textiles), its reputation and long-standing tradition as a craft is undoubtedly the source of the later textile genre. Moreover, many of the pieces in the Vatican collection referred to as opus anglicanum in the later Middle Ages were likely Anglo-Saxon textiles. See the following trade section for further evidence.
10. Budny and Twedde 76.
16. Budny and Tweddle 76.
23. Plenderleith 382.
29. Plenderleith 392.
30. Plenderleith 392.
31. Plenderleith 393.
32. quoted in Dodwell 33.
33. quoted in Dodwell 57.
34. Dodwell 180-81.
35. Dodwell 181.
40. Digby 40.
41. Digby 42.
42. Digby 42.
45. Dodwell 30, 129.
46. Dodwell 129.
47. Dodwell 129.
49. Budny 265.
50. quoted in Dodwell 130.
51. Dodwell 130.
52. Dodwell 132.
53. Dodwell 137.
54. quoted in Dodwell 286-87. Translation: “Noble purpura decks the hanging sail, / Displaying, in its various detail, / The sea-battles enraged / Our royal kings waged. / When, from the mast, the yard-arm upward swings, / Aglow with gold, the sail extends its wings” (Dodwell 137).
55. Dodwell 30.
57. Christie 7.
58. Dodwell 38.
59. Dodwell 38.
60. Christine Fell comments that “it is clear that the bed-covers, table-linen and wall-hangings which were made by the women of the household were also up to a point thought of as female property” (45).
62. Dorothy Whitelock argues that although “godwebbe” can also mean fine cloth such as silk or luxurious weaves of wool, it can also mean “purple” (note, The Will of Æthelgifu 12).
63. “her broken-twill gown, and another of linen or else some linen cloth and to Eadgyfu two chests and in them her best bed-hanging and a linen covering and all the bed-clothing which belongs to it, and her best dun tunic, and her better mantle . . . and a long hall-
hanging and another short one and three seat coverings and to Ceoldryþu the one she likes best of her black tunics and her best holy veil and her best headband, and to Æþelflæd the White her purple gown and cap and headband, and afterwards Æthelflæd should find the best of her nun’s vestments that she can for Wulflæd and Æthelgifu.”

64. Not much is known about Wynflæd beyond her will which would explain her supply of nun’s clothing, an unusual supply for a secular. Perhaps she had entered a monastery after she became a widow, as many women did in the period. Or, perhaps she produced the clothing as an intended gift to a monastery, as other women produced copes and other vestments to donate to the clergy in their lifetime or after death.


66. Dodwell 172.

67. Dodwell 172.

68. Dodwell 173.

69. quoted and translated in Crowfoot and Hawkes 63-64. The Latin reads: “Nam cultus gemini sexus huiuscemodi constat subucula bissina, tonica, coccinea sive iacintina, capitium et manicae sericis clavatae; galliculae rubricatis pellibus ambiuntur; antiae frontis et temporum cincinni calamistro crispantur; pulla capitis velamina candidis et coloratis mafortibus cedunt, quae vittarum nexibus assutae talotenus prolixius dependunt.”

70. Bede IV.26, p. 354, ll. 21-25.

71. Dodwell 57.

72. R. Morris, ed., The Blickling Homilies, Original Series 58, 63, 73 (London: N.
73. Dodwell 179.


76. Hoffmann, *Warp-Weighted* 281; Chadwick 32.

77. Arnold 116.

78. Fell 40.

79. Related terms which link textiles and the feminine suffix in *-estre* are *wultewestre* or *wultewestre* (*Concordance*) and *byrdestre*, defined “presumably one who ornaments textiles” (*Dictionary of Old English*, Fascicle B, s.v. *byrdestre*).

80. Fell 41.

81. “King Alfred’s Will” 15-19, ll. 115, 117, 122, 123.


93. Fell 40.

94. Fell 40-41. Fell adds, “Who took the credit for the work finally produced may be left to conjecture” (41).

95. Chadwick 34.

96. Chadwick 35.

97. Chadwick 35.

98. Fisher, “Fitting Place.”


100. However, in a relatively rich burial in Lechlade, Gloucestershire, a woman buried with several pieces of jewelry and other luxury objects also had a bone spindle whorl among her possessions. No weaving sword is mentioned as a part of her equipment. See

101. Walton 412.


103. Dodwell 57.


105. William of Malmesbury 125.


107. Glare, s.v.

108. Glare, s.v. *gynaecium*; *Concordance*, s.vv.


110. William of Malmesbury’s *Vita Sancti Dunstani* (c. 1000) quoted in Digby 43.

111. Christie 31.


113. Christie 1.

114. quoted in Christie 31.

115. quoted in Christie 1.

116. Loyn 85.

117. Loyn 85.
118. Loyn 86.
119. Loyn 86.
121. Dodwell 129.
122. Dodwell 182.
123. quoted and translated in Crowfoot, “Braids” 452.
125. Dodwell 72.
126. quoted in Dodwell 45.
127. Dodwell 45.
128. Dodwell 182-83.
129. Dodwell 183.
130. Christie 2.
132. Higgins 22.
Chapter 3: The Weaving of Peace and Death

PEACEWEAVING

The feminine noun freōðuweōbe ("peace-weaver") appears twice in Old English poetry, once each in "Widsið" and "Beowulf," and the masculine noun freōðuwebba appears once in "Elene." Some difficulty exists in attempting to define what the Anglo-Saxons meant by the metaphoric compound. In The Exeter Book "Widsið," the first person speaker of the same name designates Queen Ealhhild as a "fælre freōðuwebban" (6a), or "faithful or dear peaceweaver." In "Beowulf," the term occurs in the description of a young noblewoman who orders the execution of any retainer who offends her. Rather than naming her a faithful peaceweaver, the text comments, "Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw / ides to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy, / þætte freōðuwebbe feores onsæce / æfter ligetorne leofne mannan" ("Nor is such behavior queenly conduct / for a woman to bring about, although she be gloriously beautiful, that a peace-weaver should take the life of a beloved man because of feigned grief/anger") (1940b-43).

In these two instances, the term clearly refers to noble female characters whose proper role involves making peace. A resulting interpretation of "peaceweaving" is that espoused by E. Talbot Donaldson in his note on the translation of the word in "Beowulf": "Daughters of kings were frequently given in marriage to the king of a hostile nation in order to bring about peace." The history of the Germanic peoples in general as well as the Anglo-Saxons in particular suggests that women were often bringers of peace through politically-motivated marital relationships, and so the definition has been accepted among scholars. For example, in eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon England, "The healing of the
breach between Edward himself [the Confessor] and the powerful Earl Godwin was symbolized in the marriage, possibly not consummated it is true, between Edward and Godwin’s daughter, Edith. Among the nobility in general a marriage was a common, though dangerous, way of publicly announcing the end of a feud.\textsuperscript{2} Intermarriage as a peace tool was considered a risky proposition among the warring Germanic tribes: “Some kings in history felt uneasy about marrying their daughters far from the protection of their own kin group, but marriages for purposes of allegiance were a political reality.”\textsuperscript{3}

However, the third character assigned the title of “peaceweaver” calls the former interpretation into question; in “Elene,” the peaceweaver is an angel sent to mediate between Constantine and God.\textsuperscript{4} The angel comes to Constantine on the eve of a great battle while he sleeps. The angel appears “on weres hade” (“in the form of a man”) (72b), but not an average warrior. Rather, the angel is “hwit ond hiwbeorht” (“white and shining in hue”) (73a), a “wlitig wulldres boda” (“radiant messenger of glory”) (77a) who instructs Constantine to adopt the standard of the cross to ensure victory the following day. Constantine listens to the angel, the “fæle friðowebba” (“faithful or trusty peaceweaver”) (88a). As L. John Sklute points out in his article “Freoðuwebbe in Old English Poetry,” the angel is male, as the gender of the weak noun friðowebba reinforces, and although not a strictly normal human male, he does not peaceweave in the marital sense. Sklute argues that the title “peaceweaver,” does not necessarily reflect a Germanic custom of giving a woman in marriage to a hostile tribe in order to secure peace. Rather it is a poetic metaphor referring to the person whose function it seems to be to perform
openly the action of making peace by weaving to the best of her art a tapestry of friendship and amnesty. The warp of her weaving is treasure and the woof is composed of words of good will. The compound *freduwebbe* expresses the duty of the king’s wife to construct bonds of allegiance between the outsider and the king and his court. If it reflects anything of the social system of the Anglo-Saxons, it is that of the diplomat.5

Thus, the “peaceweaver” would be one who does not necessarily weave peace through marriage, but one who weaves communal ties or peace-creating bonds within society.

This interpretation and that which identifies the peaceweaver as a marriage pledge are not incompatible. The function of a woman as a marriage pledge can be seen as simply one of the ways in which she performs peaceweaving; this does not limit her function to marriage, but does not exclude it either. Textual evidence in Old English poetry suggests a correlation between women, in particular, and peaceweaving of both varieties. Jane Chance describes the peaceweaving role typically assigned the noble female characters of much Old English poetry in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*. First, Chance discusses the conventional social role of women depicted as marital peaceweavers: “The Anglo-Saxon social ideal of the aristocratic woman, or *ides*, depended upon her role as a peacemaking queen, which was achieved fundamentally through her function as a mother.”6 The marital peaceweaver makes peace through uniting or weaving interlocking ties between clans with the mixed blood of her offspring.

Chance further discusses how the conventional noble woman’s interweaving of
peace also originates in her social actions within her community. First, she passes the mead cup between lord and thanes in a symbolic, unifying act. Second, she gives gifts to insure the loyalty of the thanes to the lord and her offspring. Third, she counsels her lord with wisdom and cheerfulness and exacts oaths of loyalty from the thanes, all in an effort to preserve peace. Through these means, the noble woman plays an important symbolic role in weaving the bonds of order, unity, and peace within her society. Each aspect of this diplomatic peaceweaving is illustrated within Old English poetry and prose. First, the passing of the mead cup "is documented in all formal heroic poetry as the duty not merely of the 'woman', but of the 'lady.'" Bede also refers to the practice: "The wife of a nobleman having been cured of an illness 'brought the cup to the bishop and to the rest of us, and continued to serve us all with drink until dinner was finished.'" In addition, early laws suggest that the server of drink was generally female, although not necessarily always the noble's wife.

Passing the mead cup was a highly symbolic act: to receive drink from a lord or a queen meant a retainer accepted the duty to demonstrate loyalty. This symbolic nature of sharing the mead finds a parallel in Norse and continental Germanic tradition. A woman designated as a peaceweaver earns distinction as she diplomatically passes the mead cup to the lord and his retainers, sealing reciprocal loyalty and peaceful relationships among all members of her community. When a peaceweaver gives gifts, she performs the same function; she reinforces the gifts of her lord, which cement loyalty and peace in the clan. As Fred C. Robinson states: "Gift taking also had social and ceremonial significance, being an overt symbol of the social contract implicit in the heroic world. When a man
receives a gift from his lord or queen, for example, he solemnizes his allegiance to the dispenser of the gift. For a man to accept a gift and then fail his benefactor in time of need would not merely be ingratitude; it would be a violation of the heroic code.”¹⁰ A noblewoman’s generosity aids her in attaining success in her peacemaking endeavors, as well as bringing her fame as a peaceweaver.¹¹

Peaceweavers also fulfill their function through wise counsel to their lords. If the general observations on earlier Germanic relatives of the Anglo-Saxons bear weight, Tacitus indicates in his Germania that “they conceive that in woman is a certain uncanny and prophetic sense: and so they neither scorn to consult them nor slight their answers.”¹² In the ninth century, theorists such as the Irish poet and scholar Sedulius Scottus also “commented on the appropriateness of kings plucking the fruits of their wives’ good counsels.”¹³ The noble woman obtains honor among her people as she counsels her lord to keep peace through generosity and loyalty to the tribe, since as Maxims I of The Exeter Book indicates, the truly wise “a sace semap, sibbe gelærað / þa ær wonsælge awegen habbað” (“ever settle conflict, advise the peace that unhappy men had previously weighed”) (20-21). Peace is good counsel.

The final function of the peaceweaver, the enjoining of oaths, demonstrates the respect and influence attributed to peaceweavers. In her article “Cynewulf’s Autonomous Women,” Alexandra Hennessey Olsen mentions the tendency of “the women of Germanic tradition who admonish their male kinsmen to act in accordance with the heroic code,” using “both speech and actions” to incite men to battle.¹⁴ Tacitus also records the tradition of Germanic women changing the tides of battles “by the incessance
of their prayers and by opposing their breast.” Tacitus goes on to explain that through the women’s presence near the battlefield and their pleas for protection, the women incite the men to much greater bravery. The Old English poem “Waldere” illustrates a woman inciting her lover in a similar manner. Hildesgund, Waldere’s companion as he prepares to battle singlehandedly the two warriors who impede their escape, eagerly urges him, “Ætlan ordwyga, ne læt ðin ellen nu gy[.] / gedreosan to dæge, drhtscipe / [...] is se dæg cumen / ðæt ðu scealt aninga oðer twega, / lif forleosan oððe lag[n]e dom / agan mid eldum, Ælfheres sunu” (“Great warrior of Attila, do not now allow your courage, your nobility to fail today . . . the day is come that you must certainly [do] one of two things: lose your life or obtain a lasting reputation among men, son of Ælfhere”) (6-11). Wealhtheow similarly, but perhaps more subtly, incites Beowulf to commit to fighting Grendel in “Beowulf.”

Maxims I of The Exeter Book includes all of these peacemaking characteristics in a description of the noble woman’s role:

Cynîng sceal mid ceape cwene gebigcan,
bunum ond beagum; bu sceolon ærest
geofum god wesan. Guð sceal in eorle,
wig geweaxan, ond wif gehþon
leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan,
rune healdan, rumheort beon
mearum ond maþmum, meodorædenne
fore gesiðmægen symle æghwær
eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan,
forman fulle to frean hond
ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
boldagendum bæm ætsomne.” (81-92)

As the poem indicates, as part of her ceremonial duties, the noble woman is expected to
pass the mead cup from lord to thanes (but first to the lord as an indicator of loyalty), give gifts, and keep counsel with her lord, all elements crucial to the peace-keeping process.

"Beowulf," as the longest of the three poetic texts which mention the term \textit{freoduwebbe}/\textit{freoduwebba}, is useful in examining Chance's dual pattern of peaceweavers who act as intermediaries in metaphorically weaving the fabric of society through either marriage or diplomacy, or both. Although the young noblewoman "Thryth" is the only female character in "Beowulf" who is explicitly connected to the title of "peacemaker" (by being denied it), her improper behavior as a noble woman and its contrast to peacemaking is directly related to the other female characters in the text.\textsuperscript{18} Thryth does not figure as a character in the main plot line of "Beowulf"; like other characters in the so-called digressions, she functions as a foil, or bad example, of a certain principle: peacemaking. This is evident as the poet contrasts her behavior with that of the highly praised female characters of the main plot line: Wealhtheow, Freawaru, and most directly, Hygd. Their behavior as "proper" peacemakers defines what is meant by a woman who engages in "improper" peacemaking, and so their characteristics elucidate the meaning of Thryth's role as an anti-\textit{freoduwebbe}.\textsuperscript{19} Wealhtheow, the highest status female of the text, is a perfect example of Chance's definition of a peacemaker.

The first mention made of Wealhtheow in "Beowulf" is as she fulfills the role of mead- and peace-bringer. Beowulf and Unferth engage in a verbal duel and Unferth loses. As Beowulf then affronts Unferth by vowing to do the work Unferth cannot, Wealhtheow immediately moves forward, "\textit{cynna gemyndig}" ("mindful of her offspring/people"): 
ond ūla freolc wif ful gesealde
ærest East-Dena eþelwearde,
bæd hine bliðne æt þære beorþege,
leodum leofne . . .
Ymbeode þa ides Helminga
duguþe ond geogúde dæl æghwylcne,
sincfato sealde²⁰ (613-22)

Wealhtheow’s timing is interesting; just as hostilities escalate between Unferth and Beowulf, she arrives with the mead cup, perhaps not only checking ruffled tempers, but also reminding those within of their duties to one another and the lord. Unferth should not insult his lord’s guest, nor should Beowulf fight the band he has sworn to protect. Her behavior also mirrors the ceremony described in the “Maxims”; first she offers drink to her lord, then to his guests.

Wealhtheow continues her efforts by honoring Beowulf with gratitude and praise for coming to her rescue. Gratified, Beowulf answers, “guþe gefysed” (“impelled to fight”), (630b) that he resolved long before to be the champion of the Danes. Not only has Wealhtheow incited Beowulf to battle and to an oath which binds him to Hrothgar’s service, but by so doing, she has protected peace within the mead-hall by directing Beowulf’s valor to proper channels. He will focus on fighting Grendel and not Unferth. Both the actual and the potential threat are resolved by Wealhtheow’s timely peacemaking.

When the text next mentions her, Wealhtheow continues in her role as communal peacemaker as she advises her lord after Grendel’s death and Beowulf’s victory:

Onfoh þissum fulle, freodrihten min,
sinces brytta! Þu on sælum wes,
goldwine gumena, ond to Geatum spræc
In her admonition, Wealhtheow not only offers wise counsel to her lord, but she also
behaves as a peacemaker in several other senses. First, she offers mead to the company,
as well as reminding Hrothgar to give gifts to his guests. Both actions serve as
intertwining links of mutual obligation and loyalty. But she continues to counsel
Hrothgar not to take this gift-giving so far as to offend his own kin by taking Beowulf as
a son and contender for the throne. Instead, Wealhtheow enjoins Hrothgar, in the name
of keeping peace within his own family, to be mindful of his obligation to his kin and
leave the rulership to his heirs. Wealhtheow’s last remark also reminds Hrothulf of the
loyalties he should have to his children (the first concern of a peacemaker mother) in
return for the rewards she and Hrothgar have given him.

Significantly, following her speech, Wealhtheow turns towards her sons, whose
interests she is ultimately trying to protect with both Hrothgar and Hrothulf. These sons
represent her final success as a marital peacemaker, since they intertwine the blood of
peoples and provide safe leadership for the future after Hrothgar’s death, as well as ensuring her own longevity through offspring. But Beowulf sits with them, perhaps at Hrothgar’s wish. Having spoken to the other two powerful lords (Hrothgar and Hrothulf) who might threaten her peaceweaving (both communal and marital), she turns to ensuring Beowulf’s loyalty to her sons: “Him wæs ful boren, ond freondlaþu / wordum bewægned, ond wunden gold / estum geeawed, earmhreade twa, / hraegl ond hringas, healsbeaga mæst” (“To him was the cup borne, and a friendly invitation offered with words, and wound gold displayed with kindness, two arm-ornaments, a garment and rings, the greatest of necklaces”) (1192-95). Given both mead and great gifts, Beowulf becomes honor-bound to be loyal to both Hrothgar and his offspring and not to fight to displace them. But Wealhtheow is not yet satisfied. She speaks again to Beowulf, reminding him of his obligations as she reminded Hrothgar and Hrothulf,

Bruc ðisses beages, Beowulf leofa,
hyse, mid hæle, ond ðisses hraeglæs neot,
þeodgestreona, ond geþeoh tela,
cen þec mid crafte, ond þyyssum cnyhtum wes
lara liðe! Ìc þe ðæs lean geman.
Hafast þu gefered, þæt ðe feor ond neah
ealne wídeferþ þeras ehtigað,
efne swa side swa sæ bebugeð,
windgeard, weallas. Wes þenden þu lifige,
æþeling, eadig! Ìc þe an tela
sincgestreona. Beo þu suna minum
daedum gedeþe, dreamhealdende!
Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe,
modes milde, mandrihtne hold,
þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod ealgearo,
druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde." (1216-31)

While Wealhtheow wishes Beowulf due success, she also solicits his respect for
and protection of her sons, reminding him in the process of the gifts he has received which require fealty even as they express gratitude. Wealhtheow’s description of the good faith and honor prevalent at Heorot reminds Beowulf of the similar behavior expected of him. At Wealhtheow’s command, Heorot’s retainers are peaceful and obedient. The mention of their having received drink suggests once again that she has offered the retainers in question the ceremonial cup in return for their loyalty. Wealhtheow’s role as a peacekeeper is clear as she binds several groups of men with conflicting loyalties and desires into a peaceful community through social obligations and ceremonial gifts and speech. As to the effectiveness of Wealhtheow’s words, the text mentions no further attempts to put Beowulf in power among the Danes by anyone, even Hrothgar. Moreover, when Beowulf faces a similar situation in his homeland and Hygd actually offers him the kingdom over her young son, Beowulf shows he has learned the lesson the wise and honorable Wealhtheow taught; he holds the kingdom in stewardship for his young lord and remains loyal to him until the young king’s death. Wealhtheow’s words have successfully woven peace in more than one tribe.

An interesting note in this exchange between Wealhtheow and Beowulf is her wording “swa ic bidde” (1231b). That the retainers owe obedience to Wealhtheow clearly shows her in a position of social power. Since the dispensing of treasure, substantial control of dynastic succession, serving of mead, and a high position as counselor to the lord are part of the function of the peaceweaver, and these same things also define the power of the lord, the peaceweaver gains some status through her function. The behavior of the strong male characters in “Beowulf” certainly implies
healthy respect for Wealhtheow and her opinions. Wealhtheow’s impact on Beowulf resurfaces when he returns and reports his adventures to his own lord, Hygelac. Beowulf describes her, “Hwilum mæru cwen, / friðusibb folca flet eall geondhwearf, / bædde byre geonge; oft hio behwrielan / secge sealde, ær hie to setle geong” (“At times, the glorious queen, peace-pledge of the people, passed throughout all the hall, incited a young man; often she gave a warrior an armlet, before she went to her seat”) (2016-19). Beowulf’s memory obviously stems from his personal experiences with Wealhtheow; she incited him several times to his duty to Hrothgar and himself and then rewarded or promised reward to him for doing so. Beowulf honors these actions by entitling Wealhtheow friðusibb folca or “peace-pledge of the people.” In this case, it is through her diplomatic efforts that Wealhtheow qualifies herself for the title, a title directly related to the title freðuwebbe. Wealhtheow is clearly intended to represent a model peaceweaver.

Wealhtheow’s daughter Freawaru walks in the footsteps of her mother and therefore should also be considered a peaceweaver. Beowulf calls our attention to her in his recounting of his first adventure:

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Hwilum for daguđe dohtor Hrođgares
eorlum on ende ealuwæge bær,
ða ic Freaware fletsittende
nemnan hyrde, þær hio nægled sinc
hæleðum sealde. Sio gehaten is,
geong goldroden, gladum suna Frodan;
hafað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,
rices hyrde, ond þæt ræd talað,
þæt he mid ðy wife wælþeða dæl,
sæcca gesette.24 (2020-29a)
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Like Wealhtheow, Freawaru functions in several ways as a peaceweaver. First, she
passes the mead cup to the retainers, symbolically weaving unity among the warriors.

Second, she is promised to Ingeld of the Heatho-Bards, an attempt by Hrothgar to bring peace to the two peoples by interweaving their peoples in kin relationships through her offspring. Freawaru in particular provides evidence of both types of peaceweaving.

Beowulf’s own kinswoman Hygd is similar to Wealththeow in that she is also linked to the title of peaceweaver through both behavior and indirect attribution. The text comments that she is “wis welþungen . . . næs hio hnah swa þeah, / ne to gneað gifa Geata leodum, / maþmgestreona” (“wise and well-thought of . . . she was not niggardly, nor too sparing of gifts or treasures to the people of the Geats”) (1927a, 1929b-31a).

Hygd, although young, shows wisdom beyond her years because she gives treasure generously among her retainers. Her unusual wisdom shows understanding that through giving of treasure and mead she helps to preserve peace within her community. The poet views her behavior as contrasting with that of another young queen, Thryth. The lines introducing the comparison and Thryth’s name are often considered to apply solely to Thryth: “Modþryðo wæg, / fremu folces cwen, / firen ondrysne” (“Modthryth, excellent queen of the people, brought about terrible crime”) (1931b-32). The lines thus read make a rather abrupt transition, requiring a further supposition of a gap in the text. However, an alternate reading suggested by Kemp Malone and reasserted by Fred C. Robinson makes better sense of the transition by considering the subject, “fremu folces cwen,” to be Hygd. Thus, after the poet has introduced the good example of Hygd, he immediately explains her inspiration, “the good folk-queen had weighed the arrogance and terrible wickedness of Thryth.”25 Hygd considered the bad example of another and chose to
behave differently.

The comparison between the two is strengthened by the poet’s comment on Thryth’s crimes. As previously mentioned, Thryth’s execution of any retainer who offends her by looking upon her offends the narrator: "Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw / idese to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy, / þætte freoðuwebbe feores onsæce / æfter ligetorne leofne mannæ” (“Nor is such behavior queenly conduct / for a woman to bring about, although she be gloriously beautiful, that a peaceweaver should take the life of a beloved man because of feigned grief/anger”) (1940b-43). The poet’s disapproval is rather clear. Unlike Hygd (whose name means “thought” or “consideration”), whose wisdom and generosity protects peace and life, Thryth takes the lives of beloved retainers. The implicit as well as explicit comparisons attribute the title of proper “peaceweaver” to the wiser Hygd, who chose to do what a “peaceweaver” should. It is also interesting that the poet places the term ides (“woman or lady”) in apposition to freoðuwebbe. The apposition further links peaceweaving with the noble female characters of the text.

The peaceweavers of “Beowulf” generally match Chance’s definition of a peaceweaver. Wealththeow and Hygd are most clearly communal peaceweavers, but Freawaru is both a marital and communal peaceweaver. Not much is known about Thryth except that she is unmarried at the time of her faulty peaceweaving, since her marriage to Offa “Hemminges mæg” (“kinsman of Hemming”) (1961b) brings her bad behavior to an end. That Thryth is unmarried when designated as an improper peaceweaver is a further indication that communal weaving of peace is intended by the title of “peaceweaver.” Certainly communal peaceweaving seems the more important
determinant of peaceweaving virtue in “Beowulf.”

Unlike “Beowulf,” the text of “Widsið” of The Exeter Book offers no other examples of noble women except Ealhhild by which to gauge her title as a peaceweaver. Like Thryth, Ealhhild is relatively unknown beyond the poem itself. Within the poem, Ealhhild’s title can be interpreted as related to either marital peaceweaving or communal peaceweaving, or both. As Ealhhild is introduced in the poem, she is met in the company of a “he” (5b). If that “he” means Widsið, then the poet accompanies Ealhhild, presumably on a journey to the court of Eormanric, her future spouse. This seemingly minor detail would indicate a highly symbolic journey was underway; Kemp Malone states, “In the Heroic Age such a journey was undertaken by a woman for one purpose only: to be married.”26 In this case, Widsið may be giving Ealhhild her title because of the symbolic journey they share as she goes to cement a peace-bringing alliance through blood ties (of corresponding offspring) between distinct groups, in her case between Anglia and the Ostrogoths.

However, the “he” of 5b may also refer to Eormanric, Ealhhild’s eventual husband. In this case, the lines indicate instead that the poet (alone on a journey) visits Ealhhild and Eormanric (already married) at the Ostrogothic court.27 Then, Ealhhild’s behavior at the court, not her journey, must explain her title as a peaceweaver. Widsið’s description of Ealhhild at court shows Ealhhild giving the poet a ring and acting as “dryhtcwen duguþe” (“noble queen of the retinue”) (98a). Widsið claims that Ealhhild is “selast wisse / goldhrodene cwen giefe bryttian” (“best example I knew of a gold-adorned queen dispensing gifts”) (101b-102a). These actions combine the characteristics
of diplomatic or communal peaceweaving. Ealhhild demonstrates her peaceweaving in
this sense when, as “queen of the retinue” she ensures loyalty and renown for Eormanric
and herself through her generosity to Widsið and others. Since so little can be taken for
granted about Ealhhild beyond the few lines which describe her in “Widsið,” ultimately,
either interpretation may account for Ealhhild’s designation as a peaceweaver. Like
Hygd, however, Ealhhild’s designation as peaceweaver seems to be most likely related to
her behavior as a generous and diplomatic agent for peace within her community. As
discussed previously, the angel who visits Constantine in “Elene” is obviously a
peaceweaver in diplomatic terms. He unites two kings previously at variance, God and a
heathen Constantine.

Other characters who may shed light on peaceweaving include Eve and Mary.
Jane Chance suggests that Eve is depicted as a failed peaceweaver in the Fall in “Genesis
B.” 28 Chance argues that Eve’s reason for convincing Adam to partake of the forbidden
fruit was that she wished to act as a peaceweaver; in the Genesis B account of the Fall,
the Tempter tells Eve that God will be angry with Adam because he refused to partake of
the fruit at his lord’s command (551b-56a). 29 The Tempter then cajoles, “Gehyge on
þinum breostum þæt þu inc bam twarn meaht / wite bewarigan, swa ic þe wisie”
(“Consider in your heart that you might be able to ward off punishment from you both, as
I will show you”) (562-63). Because Eve considers the Tempter a loyal retainer to God
and fears the “enmity” arising between Adam and God by Adam’s refusal to eat the apple
at the Tempter’s command, the “idesa scenost” (“the most radiant of women”) (626a)
persuades Adam to abandon the “laðlic strið” (“hateful strife”) (663b). The poet hastens
to add that, “Heo dyde hit þeah þurh holdne hyge, nyste þæt þær hearma swa fela, / fyreneáþeða, fylgean sceolde / monna cyanne” (“She did it, however, because of a loyal heart; she did not know that from there so many harms, sinful torments, must follow to mankind”) (708-10a). The Eve of “Genesis B” is rather unconventional in the literary tradition of the Fall, perhaps because the Anglo-Saxon poet designs an Eve with motives and behavior conventional and understandable to his own society in depicting her as one interested in bringing about reconciliation and peace. This is part of her identity as an ides and an earthly queen. Eve is given no literal connection to weaving in Old English literature, but Chance cites a patristic source which comments on Eve’s role as a textile producer, the Greek text of Saint Epiphanius, who “glosses the ancient Greek rendering of Job 38, 36 . . . Who hath given to woman wisdom, or knowledge of weaving, by contrasting the clothing woven by Eve with the garment of immortality created out of the Lamb by the Virgin Mary.”30 However, this source was probably unknown to the Anglo-Saxons in its original form, at least.

Chance also suggests that Mary, as an embodiment of all positive roles available to women, would be considered a peaceweaver. Mary’s role in mediating the reconciliation of sinning humanity with their God might have caused the Anglo-Saxons to see her as a peace-pledge.31 Mary is linked with textile production; as mentioned in the previous chapter, an Old English text also depicts Mary as the finest of textile workers during her sojourn at the temple. A patristic source, a work of Saint Proclus in Latin, also “describes the Incarnation allegorically through images of the loom, weaver, wool, woof, and weaving-shuttle, with the Virgin as the woof.”32
Other texts which connect women, peace-making, and textiles include an Anglo-Latin source, the *Life of King Edward*. The patroness of the work seems to have been Edith, Edward’s queen and daughter of the powerful Godwine. The narrator accordingly dedicates space to lengthy praise of Edith, much of which depicts her as a “model of virtue” (“exemplo uirtutis”) for doing many of the same things that Wealthow does.\(^{33}\) The text indicates that Edith acts as a wise counselor to her husband;\(^{34}\) gives bountiful gifts as she aims “her bounty to such good purpose as to consider the highest honour of the king” (“et honestate hanc intendebat largitionem, ut ad regis quoque plurimum spectaret honorem”);\(^{35}\) and has regularly “cheered the king and his retinue” (“regem eiusque frequentelam serenaret”).\(^{36}\) Moreover, the text describes Edith in terms of her peace-making and -keeping abilities: “By her advice peace wraps the kingdom round / And keeps mankind from breaking pacts of peace” (“Cuius consilio pax continet undique regnum, / atque cauet populis, uiolent ne federa pacis”).\(^{37}\) The narrator also alludes to Edith’s ideal example as a textile producer: “in spinning and embroidery [she] was another Minerva” (“opere et pictura altera erat Minerva”).\(^{38}\) Edith’s renown as a textile producer is mirrored in the works of William of Malmesbury and an Old French source, both of which praise her extraordinary abilities as a weaver and embroideress in making the king’s robes.\(^{39}\)

The narrator also attributes metaphorical weaving to Edith as he describes Edith’s haste in completing buildings for the church: “No delays she wove for this undertaking” (“Nulla enim mora huic perficiendo innectitur”).\(^{40}\) This is an apparent allusion to the *Aeneid*, in which, in order to detain Aeneas and his men, Dido is advised by her sister to
"weave / excuses for delay."\textsuperscript{41} Nonetheless, the author of the life, most likely an Anglo-Saxon, would have had to have associated weaving with Edith on a metaphorical level in the first place in order to produce the allusion in this context. As previously mentioned, Edith is also an example of peaceweaving by marriage. While no statement by the narrator of Edward's life explicitly connects Edith's weaving and what seems to be both marital and societal peaceweaving, it may not be a coincidence that Edith's portrait includes and links certain elements of the character of an ideal Anglo-Saxon queen: a fine counselor, a bounteous gift-giver, a bringer of cheer, a peacemaker, and an exceptional weaver on both literal and metaphorical levels. Perhaps the peaceweaving metaphor results naturally from the connection between literal weaving and the peacemaking, socially binding activities expected of the ideal Anglo-Saxon queen.

The role of "peaceweaver" would carry an obvious weight of social power with it. Peaceweaving characters receive both power and praise for their value in establishing the peace and loyalty vital for domestic and economic prosperity in their societies. Moreover, in their marital roles, peaceweavers could play a vital role as preservers and extenders of kin alliances and loyalties. The society depicted in Old English poems, at least, illustrates the social importance and value of both women and angels who "weave peace."

However, the social role suggested by "Beowulf" and other poetic texts also has limitations to its power. In a warrior culture, marital or communal peaceweaving faces strong, counteropposing social forces. As Tacitus points out in his observations on larger Germanic culture, "you cannot keep up a great retinue except by war and violence, for it
is from their leader's bounty that they demand that glorious war-horse, and that
murderous and masterful spear: banquetings and a certain rude but lavish outfit are
equivalent to salary." Beowulf himself introduces what he perceives as the limitations
to marital peaceweaving when he discusses Freawaru's marriage to the son of Froda:
“Oft seldan hwær / æfter leodhryre lytle hwile / bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge”
(“Very rarely does the hateful spear bow down anywhere a little while after the death of a
ruler, though the bride be worthy!”) (2029b-31). As Beowulf explains, when Freawaru
brings her Danish retainers to the marriage feast, the Heatho-Bard retainers (their former
enemies) will remember fighting them, or even see some battle-prize her retainers’
ancestors had taken from one of their dead kinsmen. Under the heroic code, violence
could be the only result. Or, after a time, when the lord’s “wiflufan / æfter cearwælmum
colran weorðað” (“wife-love becomes colder after welling sorrows”) (2065b-66), then the
peace bought loses value to the lord, and hostilities begin anew. Beowulf proves
prophetic concerning the ultimate failure of Freawaru's peaceweaving attempts.

A parallel episode about the potential failure of marital peaceweaving comes in
the story of Hildeburh. Hildeburh is a Danish princess married to the king of the Jutes,
Finn, in an attempt to seal ties of peace between their two peoples. But eventually, after
she enters Jutland to begin her role as mother, cup-bearer, and gift-giver (and hence
peaceweaver), Hildeburh sees old enmities arise and her husband’s kinsmen (including
her son) and her own kinsmen slaughter each other. The Hildeburh episode emphasizes
her role as an innocent victim,

... unsynnnum wearð
Hildeburh seems to have hardly been present, let alone aware of the dramatic destruction of her community. In the end, she is able only to mourn and command that her brother and son’s corpses be burned together. Even the word choice and passive syntax “unsynnum wearð / beloren” emphasize her innocence and helplessness. Later, when the feud breaks out again, the text only mentions Hildeburh as an afterthought to her husband’s murder; she is seized after the second battle and led to her people. Hildeburh’s experience echoes in large part what Beowulf describes; a woman may have the intention to peaceweave, but in the heat of the battle, her voice is ignored. Moreover, because Hildeburh is the common element that brings them together, she is also the cause of the renewed hostilities. Marital peaceweaving, at least, houses seeds of its own dissolution or unraveling.

Then is peaceweaving, particularly marital peaceweaving, a passive role? Chance suggests: “Unfortunately, women who fulfill this ideal role in Anglo-Saxon literature are usually depicted as doomed and tragic figures, frequently seen as weeping or suffering—we think of Hildeburh bemoaning the loss of her son and her brother, torn between the pulls of two tribes . . . . It appears that the very passivity of the bride and peace pledge leads inexorably to disaster, both in Anglo-Saxon and in Germanic literature.” Christine
Fell comments: "Thus a woman whose role was designed as that of ‘peace-weaver’ may find that her mere and innocent presence is a spur to the renewal of hostilities. In such hostilities her situation is normally both passive and pitiable . . . Wherever her primary loyalties lie, the end result cannot be other than grief for the dead on both sides."

Some historical evidence parallels the political and personal helplessness of women who could be considered marital peaceweavers. As mentioned previously, Godwine’s daughter Edith married Edward the Confessor in an attempt to seal desirable political ties between father and son-in-law. However, as Godwine’s influence at court rose and fell, so did the treatment of Edith. When Godwine displeased the king, the alliance was no longer desirable and Edith “was committed to the care of an abbess.” When political realities changed, Edith was recalled, without much reference to her desires or her choice in the matter.

However, others have suggested that peaceweaving, while often a doomed enterprise, cannot be considered passive. In part, this assertion relies on the nature of weaving itself:

Weaving is not a quiet, gentle occupation like sewing. It takes strength to set up the loom and pull the warp threads to the proper tension, and the weaving itself is very active. Hand weaving has been compared to organ playing, for although the artist is seated, her hands and feet fly, and her body sways back and forth rhythmically in a great output of energy. Her mind is not idle either, for she has an intricate pattern to follow. It is really an occupation that requires total involvement if it is to produce the desired
wholeness and beauty in the union of the disparate.47 Ultimately, the determination of the active or passive nature of peace weaving can be better considered in comparison to its diametrical opposite: death-weaving. Therefore, a further discussion of this issue will be deferred to the next section.

What is most interesting about the title of “peaceweaver,” beyond what actually comprises its meaning, is that the Anglo-Saxons seem to have seen something both symbolic and fitting in assigning the role of a metaphorical weaver to those engaging in diplomacy. Why would the image of weaving have seemed so appropriate? First, the daily life of high-status females such as Wealhtheow or her historical Anglo-Saxon counterparts would have involved considerable devotion to spinning and weaving. Since a noble woman’s role, according to “Beowulf” and other texts at least, also requires diplomatic, community-building efforts, it is most probably her gender that provides the initial association between the textile outbuildings’ literal looms and the main hall’s metaphorical one. Moreover, weaving is an attractive image for the diplomacy practiced by Wealhtheow and others because it takes into account their movement from lord to retainer (and back again) with binding mead, gifts, and speeches. Each movement, like the back-and-forth movement of the shuttle in the loom, more firmly meshes the social compact being created. The angel as envoy similarly travels back and forth between God and Constantine to bond the two lords together in a compact of peace. The interwoven obligations of retainers, lord, and noble woman, the “ties that bind,” become a strong social fabric which unites a community. Marital peace weaving also involves interwoven ties of kin relationships between the woman and her offspring and two tribes. In their
completed product, both weaving and peaceweaving create an attractive and harmonious pattern protective of their makers, as well as larger society.

Such imagery incorporating complex, interwoven threads of social as well as literal components mirrors the visual interlace of Celtic origin so admired and utilized by the Anglo-Saxons in sculpture, manuscript illumination, and metalwork. Robinson suggests why all such highly wrought, “unnatural” artifacts would have appealed to the Anglo-Saxons: in a world of cold and frighteningly powerful nature, “Each artifact . . . is reassurance that mankind can control the natural world, can constrain its brute substance into pattern and order.” Robinson comments that the interlacing designs “capturing” and binding animals within initial letters are “perfect examples of this mind-set.”

Through such complex interlace patterning on the social level, “The conduct of human beings is formalized into banqueting rituals, social forms, traditions, and patterns of allegiance, thus bringing human nature as well as external nature into reassuring patterns.” Weaving (as the embodiment of the larger textile process) must have seemed an attractive metaphor to the Anglo-Saxons, considering their appreciation for skillful, hand-wrought designs which gave order to nature and natural materials. Weaving takes elements of nature and binds them in human patterns, bringing order to natural chaos, forcing nature to please and comfort the human race. The powerful woman who helps to create social order through ties that bind each member of society to communal and peaceful behavior also weaves on the imaginative plane, with similar results.

WEAVING DESTRUCTION

The making of peace through a complex web of interlocking social and kin
obligations is directly opposed to destructive forces. However, these forces of destruction have in common a tradition of association with textile imagery. For example, both Riddles #35 and #56 of The Exeter Book center around a link between the martial and textile arts. Riddle #35 uses the tools and processes of textile production to describe its identity: a shirt of armor. Riddle #56, in contrast, uses martial imagery to allude to the process of textile production, describing a shining object (a web on a loom) which receives wounds from spears and painful bonds. Like peaceweaving, death-weaving or war-weaving as a metaphor may arise from a knowledge of the very nature of the weaving process:

Weaving was a heavy task. The warp threads had to be beaten violently in an upward direction, with sword-shaped beaters made of wood or metal.

There are cases of real swords and spears having been used for the task. The Anglo-Saxons themselves seem to have made the connection between weaving and warfare, as weaving is used figuratively in an Anglo-Saxon riddle about a mail-coat and battle imagery is used in a riddle which may be about a loom.52

The “Andreas” poem of the Vercelli Book provides another example of the connection between destructive behavior and weaving.53 As the poet narrates the fate of Matthew the Apostle at the hands of the Mermedonians, whose land was “morôre bewunden” (“entwined or enveloped in murder”) (19b), he describes the tortures and persecutions Matthew undergoes, such as having his eyes put out. The heathen hordes are represented as “deofles þegnas” (“the thanes of the devil”) (43b), and their “dryas þurh
“sorcerers [modern English *druids*] through magic”) (34a) do all within their power to destroy Matthew. Despite their success in binding and imprisoning Matthew, “Him wæs Cristes lof / on fyrhðocan fæste bewunden” (“Christ’s love was wound fast within him in his soul”) (57a-58). Nonetheless, Matthew complains to God: “Hu me elpeodige inwitwrasne / searonet seowað!” (“How the hostile strangers weave [or sew] an ensnaring net for me!”) (63-64a). By contrast, God sends Matthew “sybbe under swegle” (“peace under the heavens”) (98a), promising “Nis seo þrah micel / þæt þe wærlogan witebendum, / synnige ðurh searocræft, swencan motan” (“Nor is the time great that the deceivers [modern English *warlocks*] will be able to torment you sinfully with bonds of affliction through treachery”) (107a-109). The imagery of good and evil winding through the hearts of men may or may not be a textile image, since *windan* does carry the sense of “to twist, plait, weave.” Moreover, in glosses *bewindan* may refer “to the interweaving of materials.” The weaving together of a net, however, is more clearly a textile image.

The destructive purposes of the warlike Mermedonians find an outlet through magic and woven nets of destruction, the latter certainly metaphorical.

A similar image occurs in “Beowulf” as Beowulf returns to the court of Hygelac, his uncle and lord. Beowulf recounts his experiences at Heorot and gives the sumptuous gifts to Hygelac and Hygd which Hrothgar and Wealththeow had initially given to him. This exchange seems to be a sign of his loyalty and his intent to continue as a faithful retainer to Hygelac, despite Beowulf’s recent personal successes. The narrator strongly approves Beowulf’s action, commenting: “Swa sceal mæg don, / nealles inwitnet oðrum bregdon / dyrum cræfte, deað renian / hondgesteallan” (“So must a kinsman do, not ever
to weave a malice-net for another with secret [magical?] skill, to arrange death for a companion") (2166b-2169a). The verb bregdan, like bewindan, is capable of several meanings, but that which makes the most sense in this context is “to weave,” under which definition the Dictionary of Old English includes this example. According to the Dictionary, in the form of the past participle, bregdan also refers “to battle garments: woven, meshed, interlocked” in poetry. Ælfric’s homily “Sermo Ad Populum in Octavis Pentecosten Dicendus” contains a similar image, “Se syrwienda deofol swicað æfre embe us, and on þaes mannes forðsiðe fela cnottan him bryt” (“the plotting devil forever deceives us, and on the death of that man binds him with many knots”). Although the identification of this image as textile imagery (given our incomplete understanding of the range of meanings of Old English words) is not completely unproblematic, the several references in the corpus which employ similar imagery through verbs linked to textile production suggest the strong likelihood that such a textile image was intended. Certainly, the techniques of textile production such as spinning and weaving could suggest interwoven bindings which the forces of destruction might use to entrap an unwitting creature, as Riddle #56 demonstrates.

Evidence of conflict between binders and weavers of both peace and death can be found in the opposition created between peaceweavers and death-weavers in “Beowulf.” Thryth is a good example of this opposition because the narrator places her in direct contrast to the constructive peaceweavers of the text as she sends retainers to their destruction. Moreover, the description of her behavior in “Beowulf” presents linguistic evidence that she may have been assigned the role of a symbolic weaver in the mode by
which she binds an offending retainer and allots him his destruction. When the retainer has offended, then “him wælbende weotode tealde / handgewriþcne” (“she truly arranged slaughter-bonds twisted/woven by hand for him”) (1936-37a). The image, if indeed it is a textile image, is thus inversely parallel to the image of the peaceweaver; not only is Thryth a faulty peaceweaver, she is the opposite: a weaver of death.

The only other example in “Beowulf” of a female character whose behavior is in direct contrast to the peaceweavers is Grendel’s Mother. An interesting point of similarity between Grendel’s Mother and the noble women of the poem is a designation that most share: like them, Grendel’s Mother is titled an ides (“woman” or “lady”) (1259a). The word itself may be used ironically in this case, or it may indicate that ides does not describe the moral character of the female. Rather, it may indicate that the female in question is “extraordinary. There is, further, more than a hint in its usage that the power to be exercised may have a supernatural dimension.”

Grendel’s Mother is the key female villain of the text because, in her unlawful vengeance for Grendel’s death, Grendel’s Mother engages in destructive behavior outside the accepted codes of her society, including behavior directly opposite that of a constructive peaceweaver. She comes in the night after the feasting at Heorot with the heart of a “wrecend” to “sunu deoþ wrecan” (“avenger” to “avenge her son’s death”) (1256, 1278). Once there, she seizes a respected elder, Aeschere, and kills him. But “Wæs se gryre læssa / efne swa micle, swa bið mægþa cræft, / wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen” (“Her violence was less just so much as a woman’s fierceness, the war-rage of a woman in comparison with a warrior’s”), and so when the men arise, she flees
(1282b-86, 1292-93). When Beowulf tracks her down, this warlike ides carries him away to her “niðsele” (“evil hall”) where Beowulf and the “merewif mihtig” (“mighty lake-woman”) begin fighting in earnest (1513, 1519). When Beowulf fails to kill her with his sword and handgrip, she “andlean forgeald / grimman grapum on him togeanes feng” (“retaliated, with grim grasp seized him in return”) (1541b-42). She takes the sword and tries to pierce his protective mail-coat, but she fails, and Beowulf succeeds in killing her by means of a magic sword (1554b-56).

Though brief, Grendel’s Mother’s episode epitomizes an inversion of communal peaceweaving. Chance sees the episode, in fact, as parodic. First, Grendel’s Mother visits the hall in darkness, unlike Wealhtheow whose entry is characterized by light. Next, instead of carrying the cup and gifts to the retainers to unite them in peace, she takes away, despoils, and kills Aeschere. This pattern continues as she takes Beowulf into her hall. Instead of being bright like Heorot, the hall is hostile, as is the host. She greets Beowulf with violence and “repays his gift” with battle. Chance adds, “It is interesting to note that this ‘hall-celebration’ of the mock peace-weaver to welcome her valorous guest Beowulf following her attack on Heorot and her curiously listless ‘contest’ with Aeschere duplicates the pattern of mead-sharing ceremonies involving peacemakers which follow masculine contests throughout the poem.” The poet also identifies Grendel’s Mother with masculine pronouns as well as feminine ones. Chance postulates that this gender confusion, along with both the warrior-epithets used to describe Grendel’s Mother and the naming of her den as a battle hall, are evidence of the poet’s wish “to stress this specific inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of woman as both
monstrous and masculine." This would be fitting only if the poet viewed her aggressive behavior as inappropriate to her function as a woman and peaceweaver. Chance further suggests that the ideal peaceweavers in the poem actually serve as a revealing foil for Grendel's Mother, a contention which gains support in that the episode takes place in the center of the poem surrounded spatially by most of the references to the peaceweavers. If so, then the poet defines the monstrous in opposition to the socially acceptable; Grendel's Mother is monstrous in part because she stands in contrast to the highly praised female peaceweavers in the text. She represents their opposite in bringing death and destruction instead of peace and life.

Chance argues further that Grendel's Mother's crime in killing Aeschere is not that she has avenged her son unlawfully. Rather, Chance suggests that the two feuds are separate, at least in Beowulf's eyes: "Beowulf later implies that the two feuds must remain separate, as she desires her own 'revenge for injury' (gynwraecu, 2118)... she is legally justified in pursuing her own feud given the tribal duty of the retainer to avenge the death of his lord, regardless of the acts he has committed." The battles and resulting slaughters initiated by Hygelac and other lords do not exempt their retainers from seeking vengeance for them; either the lord is not classified like a regular retainer or murder is relative in battle, and so Chance's argument has merit. If Grendel's Mother's vengeance has a possibility of justification, then what is her crime? Chance argues that it is her gender; she commits crime in that as a female, she death-weaves instead of peaceweaves. The attitude of the "Beowulf" poet towards Thryth for bringing death rather than peace may derive from the same set of social mores: it is not a woman's place
to make war or kill. Chance asserts that the very definition of the failed woman is one who inverts her peaceweaving role "through an arrogation of the heroic role of the retainer." While the Norse epics cite examples of women wreaking vengeance for their slain kinsmen in a positive context, that may not be the case in "Beowulf."

However, Chance's interpretation that Grendel's Mother's crime is a case of gender is problematic. Beowulf, although a male, is praised for not weaving death for others, in particular family. Moreover, the Mermedonians, whose leaders are probably male, are implicitly criticized and condemned in "Andreas" because they weave spiteful bonds for Matthew. Death-weaving is negative behavior regardless of gender, and therefore it does not seem to be the same thing as making war, something for which the heroes of Old English literature are not generally criticized. Further support for a difference between death-weaving and war-making is the characterization of the extremely martial heroines Elene, Judith, and Juliana, who are each portrayed as war-like and righteous women. They can hardly be considered death-weavers, even though they fail to take a non-violent, peaceweaving role. An alternative solution may be the means or mode through which destruction is accomplished. When Beowulf attacks Grendel, he attacks in retribution and indicates his hostile intention openly. He carries his notion of a fair fight so far that he refuses to use a sword against the monster when he learns Grendel does not use one. But both Grendel and Grendel's Mother attack in secret, in Grendel's case, without provocation. Grendel and his mother also utilize cunning arts to give themselves an unfair advantage, as Beowulf's companions discover when they try to intervene to aid Beowulf in his fight against Grendel: "Hie þæt ne wiston, þa hie gewin
drugon, / heardhicgende hildemecgas, / ond on healfa gehwone heawan þohton, / sawle secan: þone synscaðan / ænin ofer eorþan irenna cyst, / guðbilla nan gretan nolde; / ac he sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde, / ecea gehwylcre” (“They did not know, when they undertook the trouble, the brave shield-warriors, and on each side thought to hew him, to seek his soul: not one of the choicest of iron battle-swords over the earth would be able to have an effect upon that wicked criminal; but he had made battle-weapons, any kind of edge, useless by a spell”) (798-805a).”

Whatever can be said of Grendel can usually be said of his mother; when Beowulf attacks Grendel’s Mother, he is also unable to harm her by his sword. It is only when he seizes one of her swords, a magical sword of giants, that he is able to kill her. Likewise, as Grendel may be called a “feond on helle” (“a fiend in hell”) (101b) and a “deorc deapscua” (“a dark death-shade”) (160a), so may Grendel’s Mother. The text also asserts that Grendel is a descendant of Cain; from Cain “woc fela / geosceægtgasta” (“originated many of the fate-spirits [those sent by fate?]”) (1265b-66). Grendel’s Mother would naturally share this origin with her son. Grendel’s glowing eyes and the unearthly fire in their magical cave suggest both demons are not simply mortals going about everyday feuds. These death-weavers are deceitful sorcerers, death-spirits, and emissaries of fate. Likewise, when the Mermedonians capture and torment Matthew, they use secret arts and deceitful wiles associated with the devil and magic to harm him. Both sets of villains are also considered offspring or at least servants of evil who work in secret. From a Biblical perspective, both the Mermedonians and Grendel’s Mother behave in a very similar fashion to her progenitor, Cain; he murdered Abel in secret to seal a compact with Satan.
Discussing such types of murder, Maxims I indicates, “ne biþ þæt gedefæ deap, þonne hit gedyrned weorðeð” (“that death is not proper, when it is kept secret”) (116). Perhaps Grendel’s Mother’s crime, then, is that she does not attack openly, but in darkness and deceit, and also that she makes use of evil magic to do so.

Several Germanic sources (whose focus is likewise the martial exploits of early Germanic heroic times) have interesting parallels to the death-weaving of Grendel’s Mother. In the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus (written between 1208 and 1218 in Denmark), Skuld, sister to Rolf (Hrothulf of “Beowulf”) king of the Danes, grows tired of her noble husband’s duty to pay Rolf tribute. Saxo Grammaticus describes how she then “bent her mind to evil contrivances” by inciting her husband to “weave snares for Rolf” that ultimately prove Rolf’s destruction. The narrator evinces clear contempt for both Skuld and her husband for their use of deceit, stating elsewhere that even when necessary, to attack in secret “like a thief,” “with nocturnal subterfuge” and “concealed ambush instead of displaying his valour in the open” must “sully” a man’s fame. In other Icelandic sources roughly contemporary with Saxo Grammaticus, Skuld is also depicted as a sorceress of “elfin stock” with “elves and norns and other creatures” in league with her to bring about Rolf’s destruction. Like Grendel’s Mother and the Mermedonians, Skuld is depicted as engaging in deceit and sorcery in the weaving of wiles, and for such is criticized and demonized.

Queen Kriemhild of the Nibelungenlied, described as a vålandinne or “she-devil,” plots revenge against her brothers and is characterized similarly as practicing “many foul wiles.” Although wile-weaving is not mentioned, her vilification is similar to the wile-
weavers of other texts. In this case, however, it is difficult to tell if Kriemhild, originally a heroine as the bride of Siegfried, has earned her vilification by her plotting against kinsmen, her plotting revenge as a female, or simply her plotting in secret (or all of the above). Women make a natural target for such vilification; open warfare such as Beowulf engages in is generally based on male strength, while the secretive and subtle vengeance, the only way available to Kriemhild to avenge her lord, is condemned. Kriemhild’s parallel in Norse tradition, Gudrun is not villified for her role as avenger, perhaps because she does not murder her brothers, although she still contrives to murder her sons and feed them to Attila, as well as to arrange his demise.

Gudrun of the *Laxdæla Saga* (c. 1245) is a different story. The Icelandic noblewoman (not related in any way to the previous Gudrun) incites her husband Bolli to kill her former lover Kjartan, but while the narrator depicts Gudrun as proud, vengeful, and rather cruel, she is neither a sorceress nor a deceitful weaver of wiles. However, Gudrun parallels her textile work to Bolli’s death-work in killing Kjartan. As Bolli returns to report the deed, Gudrun answers, “Morning tasks are often mixed: I have spun yarn for twelve ells of cloth and you have killed Kjartan.” Beyond this subtle parallel syntax lies a stronger parallel in etymology. Nanna Damsholt translates the statement, “‘Great *vaðaverk* have taken place today: I have spun 12 ells of yarn and you have killed Kjartan.’” Damsholt adds, “This is a play on words, since *vaðaverk* means both violent deed and work on weaving homespun cloth.” Gudrun’s parallels implicitly connect her work spinning yarn with death. Although the *Laxdæla Saga* and the other sources mentioned are too late to serve as immediate analogues for Old English death-weaving,
each does draw upon a similar heroic code, shared legends, related languages, and a common cultural past, and so may shed light through the use of a similar idiom and image. 

Within another group closely connected to the Anglo-Saxons, the Celtic Irish, is found another interesting parallel to the death-weaving of Old English and other Germanic texts. In the Metrical Dindshenchas (ninth to eleventh century) of Medieval Ireland, “Durgen found suffering on every side / by the hand of Indech, who traversed the battle-field, / she was daughter of Luath, bloody in combat, / overcomer of a hundred warriors, one that knit strife.” The sons of Snuaille mac Bcduib are also described: “good at weaving strife, / were the men of martial arts.” It is difficult to assess the direction of influence which might explain such an interesting common image, particularly since it could have arisen independently.

Helen Damico argues that as a death-weaving ides, Grendel’s Mother may have some connection to the valkyries of pan-Germanic mythology who weave the warp of death. Several factors suggest this. For one, if Grendel is a demon sent by fate, then his mother is probably one as well, a death-bringer sent by fate like the valkyries. Moreover, “Wælcyrge ‘chooser of the slain’ . . . consistently refers to creatures who are malevolent, destructive, corrupt, and associated with slaughter.” Grendel’s Mother is certainly all of these. She has a paralytic effect upon the warriors in the hall when she attacks and fills them with terror, an effect characteristic of a valkyrie. When she strikes, Grendel’s Mother “seizes” the men she wishes to kill, as valkyries do in battle. Nora K. Chadwick suggests that Grendel’s Mother’s epithets such as “wælgæst wæfre” or “roaming
slaughter-spirit” identify her with valkyries, as well.47

The structure of the poem itself suggests further support for the intentional characterization of Grendel’s Mother as a valkyrie-like figure. When the poet chooses to give Grendel’s Mother the title of ides, for example:

Without disrupting the metrical pattern or breaking semantic congruity, he could, for example, have substituted for ides the more appropriate atol ‘horrid’, ‘dire’, ‘terrible’ . . . . He chose instead to evoke a dialectical image encompassing two extremes of female identity—the splendid noblewoman on the one hand and the monstrous creature on the other . . . . A similar hybrid is found elsewhere in Beowulf in Modthrytho, whose blend of evil spirit and beautiful form is also reminiscent of the image of the disir of Old Norse literature—at once dire, vengeful war-spirits and resplendent women.48

Damico makes an interesting connection between the other death-weaver in “Beowulf” and the death-weaving valkyries. Thryth seems a good candidate for a valkyrie in her murderous behavior as she “binds” the men she kills, as valkyries also do. Damico adds that “Although the environment is courtly and the queen a freowweorde ‘peace-weaver’, Modthrytho’s weaving of slaughter-bonds is reminiscent of the weaving of chains and twisting of shackles in which the idisi of the Meresburg Charm engage, and the paralytic state that grips her victim is analogous to the terror that the idisi generate in theirs.”49 A further connection between Thryth and the valkyries comes from mythology, in which her name (itself not entirely unproblematic) is linked to stories of an ancient
valkyrie married to Offa. If Thryth as well as Grendel’s Mother is linked to valkyries and death-weaving, the poet of “Beowulf” may have intentionally set the monstrous death-weavers in direct opposition to the peaceweavers in the text. The poet’s opposition of Thryth and Hygd supports this notion, and an opposition of interest is clear in Grendel’s Mother’s case as she seeks to destroy the community preserved by Wealhtheow’s peaceweaving through her own death-weaving. Patricia Joplin describes a similar opposition in Greek mythology that pits peacemaking and death-making against each other: in the story of Philomela and Procne, “There are, after all, two women, and peace (making) and violence (unmaking) are divided between them.”

Generally, contemporary scholars scoff at the notion of valkyrie imagery in “Beowulf” and other texts, perhaps in reaction to the excesses of the Grimm and Kemble era. To some extent, healthy skepticism is appropriate; even in “Beowulf,” neither Grendel’s Mother nor Thryth could possibly be valkyries in a clear or direct way, since neither seems to fulfill either of the classical functions of valkyries, serving Woden in Valhalla or allotting death in battle. Nonetheless, both female characters share characteristics of valkyries that suggest a potential link to the image and tradition of the valkyrie is possible. Moreover, a variety of evidence in the Old English corpus indicates the Anglo-Saxons had some belief in the existence of valkyries and an awareness of their characteristics, whether they thought of them as religious figures or demonic evildoers. The most basic evidence is the existence of the word wælcyríge or “chooser of the slain.” What the word means in its various contexts beyond obvious semantics is more problematic. As Fell indicates, “The existence of the English form must mean that the
Anglo-Saxons had once had a similar tradition [to the Norse valkyries], and the word itself must have remained readily comprehensible throughout the Anglo-Saxon period since both its elements were in common use. But we never find it used with the supernatural implications of the Old Norse word.92

In several instances in glossaries, the word is used to gloss the avenging furies or battle goddesses of the Romans and Greeks, perhaps at least pointing to a similar figure from an Anglo-Saxon mythology of the past or a Viking import.93 Once, wælcyrie is paired with gydene “goddess,” but this is most likely related to the Latin lemma, ueneris “of Venus,” although one might wonder why wælcyrie would be considered an appropriate translation for Venus.94 The “Wonders of the East” explains the term differently: “Gorgoneus, þæt is Wælcyrginc” (“Gorgoneus, that is ‘valkyrie-like’”).95 This particular conflation of valkyries and Gorgons may arise from the baleful eyes associated with valkyries,96 since the “Wonders” also describes a horrible creature and gives it “wælkyrian eagan” (“valkyrie eyes”).97 The remaining references to wælcyrige occur in homiletic texts which link the word to other words for witches, whores, and other reprobates.98

Images reminiscent of the valkyries occur in an Old English charm (perhaps appropriate given the connection to magic) known as “For a Sudden Stitch,” in which the narrator chants: “Hlude wæran hy, la, hlude, ða hy ofer þone hlæw ridan / . . . . Stod under linde under leohtum scylde, / þær ða mihtigan wif hyra mægen beræddon / and hy gyllende garas sændan” (“Loud were they, lo, loud, when they rode over the barrow . . . . I stood under the shield, under the light shield, where the mighty women concentrated their
might, and yelling, they cast spears") (3, 7-9). The narrator repeatedly promises protection from such spears, "hægtessan geweorc" ("work of the furies or witches") (19a), or the "esa gescot" ("shot of the gods [the Aesir, in this case probably meaning 'heathen gods']") (23a, 25a), "ylfa gescot" ("shot of elves") (23b, 25b), or "hægtessan gescot" ("shot of furies or witches") (24a, 26a).

Like most of the charms, the interpretation of this charm, as Audrey Meaney states, "has exercised the minds of a heap of learned men; fortunately, we have only to note here that the agent of inflicting harm is certainly supernatural." The Anglo-Saxons seem to have believed in elf-shot, meaning that many illnesses or pains of unknown origin within the body were attributed to the unseen shots of malicious, supernatural beings such as elves. Thus, the narrator attributes sudden pain to the shots of one of these kinds of creatures, claiming to have caught the hœgtessan in the act in order to counteract their effect on the listening patient. The narrator derives power against them by naming their weapon and its source and then applies an iron knife like the blades imagined to have inflicted the pain to exorcise it. The imagery in the charm of war-like women of inhuman origin bearing down from the grave with screams and spears to destroy a human being seems remarkably like the image of a valkyrie. The appearance of the inhuman females from the vicinity of the hlæw "burial mound, grave" is a further connection to the original function of valkyries, who come from the realms of the slain.

The word hægtessan [modern "hag" or "witch"] appears in the Old English corpus few times outside this charm, but where it does, the word glosses terms for the Roman furies, as the word wælcyrice does in half of its glossarial appearances. It is reasonable
to consider that the two words overlap in meaning to some extent. The use of both words and their related imagery suggest an existence within Anglo-Saxon culture of a valkyrie-like, death-bringing figure. In a post-Christian era, an identification of these heathen figures of death with demonic spirits (in which Medieval Christians such as Guthlac definitely believed) or witches would only be too natural. The charm seems to illustrate that some Anglo-Saxons at least maintained the superstition in invisible workers of harm who appear very similar to the valkyries of Germanic legend.

What may or may not be a similar image occurs in another charm, “For a Swarm of Bees.”103 The narrator chants to keep bees from dissipating during a swarm, calling the bees sigewif (“victorious woman”) (9). The narrator then tries to harness the cooperation of the sigewif. The epithet sigewif seems an allusion to a martial female, one armed with spear-like barbs who threatens to run out of control. However, although some scholars list the charm as an indication of Anglo-Saxon belief in valkyries, the context of this particular charm does not seem strong enough evidence to make so definitive a statement.104 The epithet may be related to a number of other factors, including the ancient respect for bees as unusually intelligent creatures who might be flattered by what seems a term of respect.105 Or, the epithet may indeed refer to vaguely remembered war-like women propitiated by the speaker’s ancestors. The image in this case is suggestive, if nothing more.

For this study, what is most interesting about the possibility that demonic females in the Old English corpus are related to valkyrie-figures is their link to textile production in analogues and related cultures. As already mentioned, the first Meresburg Charm,
which has been dated between 750-925, depicts women almost universally identified as valkyries who bind, weave, and unbind the shackles of prisoners. The poems of the Edda Saemundar or Poetic Edda, which some consider to have been orally composed prior to the Norse conversion in 1000 AD and written down after conversion, also show valkyrie swan-maidens surprised by Weland and his brother, "spinning linen." Moreover, the Old Norse poem Darradarljóð, dated around 1014-1015 and contained within Njal's Saga (c. 1280), rather graphically describes valkyries in a hut in Scotland weaving a slaughter web which predicts as well as determines the course of the Battle of Clontarf, fought in Ireland in 1014 between two Viking armies. Grim detail from Njal's Saga contextualizes the song. A man named Dorrud saw twelve riders go into a woman's room, and as he looked in on them, he saw women before a grisly loom, chanting a strange song as they work:

Blood rains
From the cloudy web
On the broad loom
Of slaughter.
The web of man,
Grey as armour,
Is now being woven;
The Valkyries
Will cross it
With a crimson weft.

The warp is made
Of human entrails;
Human heads
Are used as weights;
The heddle-rods
Are blood-wet spears;
The shafts are iron-bound,
And arrows are the shuttles.
With swords we will weave
This web of battle.¹⁰⁹

The song explicitly depicts the process of textile production as a metaphorical process of choosing the slain, or deciding the fates of human beings. The bloody “weapons” or parts of the loom (a warp-weighted loom) are reminiscent of Riddle #56. In conjunction with these dire and bloody descriptions, the valkyries sing a song which seems very similar to the rhythmic weaving and particularly spinning songs of textile workshops, repeating “Let us now wind / The web of war” as the precursor to each fatal decision concerning the battle. For example,

Let us now wind
The web of war,
Where the warrior banners
Are forging forward.
Let his life
Not be taken;
Only the Valkyries
Can choose the slain.

Lands will be ruled
By new peoples
Who once inhabited
Outlying headlands.
We pronounce a great king
Destined to die;
Now an earl
Is felled by spears.¹¹⁰

The weaving song proves prophetic to the outcome of the battle. The valkyries then depart with a fierce energy reminiscent of “Against a Sudden Stitch”: “Let us ride our horses / Hard on bare backs, / With swords unsheathed, / Away from here.”¹¹¹ Upon the completion of their chant, the women “tore the woven cloth from the loom and ripped it
to pieces, each keeping the shred she held in her hands."112 The valkyries of the poem are obviously magical beings who weave destruction in secret for others, much like Grendel's Mother or the Mermedonians. In an area normally "the sphere of peace, the home and women,"113 this is destructive weaving that rips the "web of man" or life itself.

An Old English reference which does not mention valkyries, but which may describe death-binding by witchcraft (with which valkyries are linked in later Anglo-Saxon England) occurs in Ælfric's "Natale Sancti Stephani." A mother enraged with one of her children determines to avenge herself on him by cursing him: "wolde ðone sunu þe hi getirigde mid wyriungum gebindan" ("she wished that she might afflict that son to bind him with curses").114 She succeeds with aid from the devil and hangs herself. Another Old English reference which seems more likely to be a magical textile image occurs in "Beowulf" at the dragon's lair. The narrator describes the hoard of ancient gold as "galdre bewunden" ("wound or woven with a spell") (3052b), a spell which prevents the opening of the hoard until God should intervene.

A continental source which also connects magic and weaving, the Corrector (compiled c. 1010) of Burchard of Worms asks:

Have you been present at or consented to the vanities which women practise in their woollen work, in their weaving, who when they begin their weaving hope to be able to bring it about that with incantations and with their actions that the threads of the warp and of the woof become so intertwined that unless [someone] makes use of these other diabolical counter-incantations, he will perish totally? If you have been present or
consented, you must do penance for thirty days on bread and water."115

Meaney points out, "what is clear is that to the people of the early Middle Ages, 'weaving spells' was no mere empty phrase."116 Meaney states elsewhere, "weaving is frequently associated with magic."117 Magic-working women in each case bring about death and destruction in the form of binding and weaving.

The usual mantra that we must use caution in equating analogues separated by both time and geography with the Anglo-Saxon evidence is more than justified, and one must avoid overestimating the evidence of "identical" weaving valkyries or witches in analogous cultures. However, it is undeniable that common beliefs among other Germanic peoples included beliefs in valkyrie-figures or simply magical creatures whose destructive behavior was often associated with textile production, and some Old English sources suggest the same. If indeed Grendel's Mother and Thryth carry a sense of the valkyrie or valkyrie-turned-witch about them, then the association is further evidence that they could be considered death-weavers (weaving strife and war) in a parallel opposition to the peaceweavers within "Beowulf."

As mentioned previously, how we interpret Grendel's Mother and her death-weaving actions in turn affects how we interpret the parallel opposite, peaceweaving, in particular whether or not we assess it as an essentially active or passive task.118 Chance argues, on the basis of the ideal of the Virgin Mary, that within the Old English corpus, most positive roles for women (including peaceweaving) are passive, and Grendel's Mother's crime as a death-weaver is based on failing to meet this ideal. Damico, on the other hand, asserts that Wealhtheow (a peaceweaver) and other heroines such as Judith
embody the positive martial traits associated with valkyries, traits active in nature. Aside from these claims, Wealhtheow’s active role in making the peace in her community belies a passive interpretation of her role, and the behavior of Judith in binding and defeating a demon can hardly be considered anything but active. Whether peaceweaver or death-weaver, moreover, the women associated with these roles weave, and weaving is an active task. What then, is the difference between peaceweaving and death-weaving?

Perhaps the passive/active opposition generally applied to these metaphorical weavers is less important than an opposition between their constructive and destructive roles. Generally, the female characters in question, as women, can be considered to extend literal weaving to a metaphorical level, but on opposing sides of the same fence. Each of the weavers fights a war of her own, the peaceweavers against war-makers and evil death-weavers and the death-weavers against life itself. That so many of the female characters in question are called ides is simply more evidence that their basic differences come from their choice of what impact they will have societally: will they be constructive weavers of peace or deceitful weavers of death? That Thryth could change sides mid-life is but further indication that this is the case. The weaving metaphors indicate the powerful roles women were perceived as playing in the creation (or destruction) and stabilization (or unravelling) of the social fabric of their communities, as well as a general if not universal trend to depict weaving, metaphoric or literal, as a gendered characteristic. Good or bad, noble or not, images of many female characters and their actions in the Old English corpus center around weaving, from wool to interlaced strands of social obligation and death.
Notes

Chapter 3


2. Loyal 274-75.


5. L. John Sklute, “Freoduwæbbe in Old English Poetry,” New Readings on Women in Old English Literature, eds. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana UP, 1990) 208. However, Sklute also points out the possibility that the author of “Elene” may be refashioning a secular metaphor for a spiritual context, which implies that the secular metaphor associated with women would have been reworked to apply to a male angel.


7. Fell 50.

8. quoted in Fell 50.


11. In the German epic *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200), a poem which celebrates the martial Germanic society of the past, the narrator comments that when Queen Kriemhild is pleased with the reports of two men, "she lavished rewards on those minstrels and enhanced her good name in doing so" (189). A. T. Hatto, translator, *The Nibelungenlied* (1965; London: Penguin, 1969).


13. Hill 238. Scottus also lived in continental Europe for much of his life and wrote influential treatises in Latin.


15. Tacitus 143.


17. "A king shall buy a queen with goods, with cups and rings. Both must first be liberal with gifts; valor in battle must flourish in the noble man, and the woman must prosper beloved among her people, be light of heart, keep counsel, be generous with horses and precious things. At the mead-passing, before a band of warriors anywhere, she will
always greet the ruler of princes first with the first cup, quickly offer it to the hand of the lord and keep counsel with him in the household, both of them together.”

18. Some question exists as to the proper name of “Thryth.” Klaeber’s edition of “Beowulf,” among many others, lists her name as “Modthryth” (1931b), linking the preceding syllable or word of the poetic line with “Thryth.” However, as will be discussed in a later section, alternate readings of the text as well as analogues suggest that “Thryth” is a separate word from “Mod.” This study reflects the latter position in calling the young woman in question “Thryth.”

19. In a recent article, Alexandra Henessy Olsen makes a similar argument, and her interpretation of the gender roles for women in “Beowulf” is very similar to that which follows. See Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, “Gender Roles,” A Beowulf Handbook, eds. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, Neb.: UP Nebraska, 1997) 311-24.

20. “and the beautiful woman offered the cup first to the guardian of the native land of the East-Danes, asked him to be happy at the beer-drinking, beloved to the people. . . Then the woman of the Helmings went around to each one of the old and young retainers, gave them the precious drinking vessel.”

21. “Take this cup, my great lord and treasure-giver. Be happy, gold-friend of men, and speak to the Geats with kind words, as a man ought to do. Be cheerful with the Geats, mindful of the gifts from near and far which now you have. Someone told me that you might wish to have the warrior [Beowulf] for a son. Heorot is cleansed, a bright ring-hall; enjoy the many rewards while you are able, and leave your people and kingdom to your kinsmen when you must go forth to see the decree of fate. I know my gracious
Hrothulf; he will keep in mind the honor due the young warriors if you, friend of the Scyldings, leave the world sooner than he. I believe he will repay our children with good if he remembers all which we two have done for his delight and honor when he was a child.”

22. “Enjoy this ring, beloved Beowulf, young man, with prosperity, and use this garment, both treasures of the people, and rightly prosper. Prove yourself with courage, and be gracious with advice to these youths. I will remember to reward you for it. You have behaved such that far and near all men will always praise you, even as widely as the sea, home of the winds, extends its walls. As long as you live, prince, be prosperous! I wish you well with each of these precious treasures. Be kindly and joyful in your deeds with my sons! Here is each brave man true to another, kind of heart, faithful to his lord. The thanes are peaceful/obedient, retainers prepared, warriors furnished with drink do as I bid.”

23. In The Exeter Book, “Widsið” mentions that “Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon længest / sibba ætsonne suhtorfædran” (“Hrothulf and Hrothgar held peace together longest, uncle and nephew”) (45-46). This may allude to their success in keeping peace between their nation and others, or it may indicate the fame of their long peace with one another. Eventually this peace would end with the destruction of Heorot.

24. “Sometimes the daughter of Hrothgar bore the ale-pitcher before the troop of old retainers, in the region of warriors; then I heard those seated in the hall call her Freawaru, where she gave the precious nailed cup to the retinue. She is promised, young gold-adorned one, to the gracious son of Froda; the lord of the Scyldings, guardian of the
nation, has brought this about and considers it gain, that he may settle a portion of deadly feuds and strifes with this woman."


27. Malone 137.


30. Chance, Woman 78.

31. See, for example, Assmann X.699-705.

32. Chance, Women 78.


34. Barlow 23.

35. Barlow 42.

36. Barlow 54.

37. Barlow 15.


39. Both sources are cited in Chapter 2 of this work. See pages 86-87.

40. Barlow 47.

42. Tacitus 153.

43. “Guiltlessly she was deprived of beloved ones at that shield-play, of son and brother; . . . . That was a mournful woman! Not at all without reason did the daughter of Hoc bemoan the decree of fate after morning came, when she was able to see under the heavens the hateful murder of kinsmen, where she before had the greatest joy in the world.”

44. Chance, Woman 10.

45. Fell 37.

46. Blair 107.


48. In the analysis of manuscripts, at least, such interlace is often described metaphorically as a textile: e.g. “carpet pages.” It is rather likely that the interlaced patterns within woven textiles initially inspired interlace design in other media.

49. Robinson, “History” 121.


54. Bosworth and Toller, s.v.
55. *Dictionary of Old English*, Fascicle B, s.v.
59. Leyser 57.
60. Since Grendel was a murderer, his family was allowed neither compensation nor revenge for his death.
64. Chance, “Structural” 249.
70. In its criticism of secret weaving of wiles by men, Anglo-Saxon culture is different, for example, from Greek. In Homer, Odysseus and others are depicted as weaving snares for enemies (Scheid and Svenbro 112). While Homer’s characterization of Odysseus is somewhat ambivalent, Odysseus is certainly not villainized for his tricks, particularly in
his own epic. Immortals such as Eros, Athena, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Hermes, and Athena are also connected to wile weaving and considered clever for their subtlety (Detienne and Vernant 45, 180, 284-86). This does not always seem to hold true for mortal women, however (see note 77).

71. Lines 987b-990 later elaborate that no weapons of iron are able to hurt Grendel, and by extension his mother.


73. Davidson and Fisher I.287.


75. However, one might also argue that Skuld is demonized and given attributes of a vile, deceitful sorceress because she is on the wrong side in the narrative. Whatever Skuld’s “innocence” or “guilt,” what is important for this study is that the explicit “weaving” of wiles is associated with deceit and sorcery.

76. Hatto 218, 317.

77. The tendency to demonize the subtly vengeful female is not unique to Germanic sources. As Detienne and Vernant point out, in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, Clytemnestra is portrayed as the evil and deceitful genius responsible for her husband’s death as she traps
Agamemnon (who has ritually slaughtered their daughter) in a woven cloth from which he cannot escape during a fatal attack (296). They comment, “Wherever cunning plotting or fraudulent manoeuvring is concerned the Greek likes to believe that it is a matter for a woman” (321, n. 78).

78. See, for example, the summary of her role in the tales of the Volsungs in The Poetic Edda, edited and translated by Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) xx-xxi.


81. Damsholt 84.

82. The Poetic Edda, which derives from the same tradition at an earlier date, does not show death-weaving, but does depict wile-weaving. As Helgi Hundingsbani discusses his impossible life with Gripir, he asks “What compensation will that bride [Brynhild] accept, when we’ve woven for her such deceit?” (Larrington 149.46.1-2).


84. Gwynn III.273.3-4. The phrase “good at weaving strife” or “fri ferga fige” (III.272.3) is very similar to the previous expression.

86. Damico, "Valkyrie" 178-79.

87. quoted in Damico, "Valkyrie" 178-79.

88. Helen Damico, Beowulf's Wealthow and the Valkyrie Tradition (Madison: UP Wisconsin, 1984) 69. The disir of Norse mythology are often conflated with both valkyries and fates because they "concern themselves with the fates of fighting men" (Larrington 283, n. 156).

89. Damico, "Valkyrie" 179.


91. Joplin 47.

92. Fell 29-30.

93. Concordance, see also s.vv. wealcyrie, wælcyrie.

94. Concordance, s.v.


96. In the Poetic Edda, for example, the nobleman Hagal explains away the revealing eyes of disguised Helgi Hundingsbani by claiming Helgi is not simply a captured serving maid (which is his disguise), but a valkyrie who "sped above the clouds and dared to fight like a viking . . . that's why the Ylfing girl has terrifying eyes" (Larrington 133.4.3-4, 7).


98. Concordance, s.v. wælcyrian.


100. Audrey L. Meaney, Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones, BAR British Series
In Norse tradition, for example, Helgi Hiorvardsson meets his *femme fatale*, Svava the valkyrie, as she and other valkyries ride near the burial-mound on which he is sitting (Larrington 125). Larrington comments, “burial-mounds are places where supernatural incursions often occur” (280, n.125). In most of their appearances in the *Poetic Edda*, at least, Norse valkyries come riding wildly into battle on horseback (cf. 135).

Concordance, s.vv., see also s.vv. *haëtæs, haëtæssa, haëtæsse*.


John Mitchell Kemble, for example, supports Grimm’s assertion that “sigewif” is reminiscent of and linked to the names of a number of the valkyries of Germanic mythology, including Sigdrifa, Sigrun, and Sigrlinn. See *The Saxons in England: A History of the English Commonwealth till the Period of Norman Conquest*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, 2 vols. (1876; New York: AMS, 1971) 404. While visual similarity is undeniable, “sige” is a very common epithet in Old English; the argument cannot be accepted uncritically.


Larrington 102.

Damsholt 87.

110. Magnusson and Pálsson, Njál’s 350.
111. Magnusson and Pálsson, Njál’s 351.
112. Magnusson and Pálsson, Njál’s 351.
113. Damsholt 88.
115. quoted in Meaney, Amulets 185.
119. Although one must hasten to add that this choice ultimately resides in the hands of writers, whose interests and biases in depicting the female characters in question truly determine the assignment of the characteristics of both heroines and villains, as well as the interpretation of their fictive or historical actions.
Chapter 4: Weaving Fate, Creation, and the Forces of Nature

The connection of metaphorical weaving with extraordinary, mortal beings is paralleled in the Old English corpus by weaving of a more cosmic sort: the weaving of fate, creation, and the forces of nature. The first metaphor, the weaving of fate, has been a cause of some controversy in Anglo-Saxon studies. Scholars have debated since the eighteenth century whether a weaving fate is a pan-Germanic, pagan goddess or lady Fortuna, submissive to a Christian God. The argument is based largely on the translation of the word *wyrd*, a word linked with most of the textile imagery to be discussed in this chapter. *Wyrd* can mean a great many things: an event, the approach of death, fate (lower case), Fate (upper case), Providence (upper and lower case), and one’s lot in life, etc. An overview of scholarship reveals the existence of at least three interpretative camps: first, the group (most popular until the turn of this century) which equates poetic *wyrd* directly with the Germanic Fate goddess(es);¹ second, the group obviously reacting to the first equation which argues that *wyrd* cannot possibly ever mean the Germanic Fate goddess, but rather that it has a post-Christian meaning; and third, the group which asserts that *wyrd* has a range of meanings, including those asserted by the first two groups. According to a recent study by Edward B. Irving, Jr., the third position is presently most popular, at least in regards to “Beowulf.”²

The zeal of the initial group, the “pagan group” to find, elevate, and often recreate pagan contexts for *wyrd* caused many to exaggerate their evidence beyond scholarly surmise. E. G. Stanley’s *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, first published as a series of nine articles in 1964-65 and reprinted as a book in 1975, documents such
behavior. Their general technique is illustrated as follows: some paganist scholars asserted that Old English *mearcweardas* ("marsh guardians") must be considered a pagan allusion to Woden on the basis that marshes are important in the worship of Woden. Likewise, *sigorcynn* "victorious people" is said to be reminiscent of the joys of Valhalla. Both assertions may be true, but much too little evidence exists to prove them.

The second group, the "Christianists," is generally accorded more respect than the paganists. Old English literature is clearly the literature of a Christianized people, but some Christianists have taken their viewpoint too far, as well. B. J. Timmer, author of a seminal article on *wyrd*, writes: "There can hardly be any doubt that the outlook on life of the Germanic peoples was fatalistic. In all the old-Germanic dialects words and expressions occur representing an original belief in Fate, still visible even after the actual words had lost much of their original meaning. Such a word, common to all the Germanic languages, is the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*." He also asserts that "*wyrd*, originally the name for the power that ruled men's lives, the blind and hostile Fate, and at one time a proper name for the goddess of Fate, came to be used for the events as they happened according to fate, followed by a transitional period in which *wyrd* took on a Christianized meaning." But this balanced approach to the multiple meanings of *wyrd* begins to evaporate when Timmer explains that, since all Old English texts as we have them come from a later period than the conversion, even an "association" between a Germanic fate figure and *wyrd* is no longer possible. He also assumes that the meaning of *wyrd* in one poem or several poems necessarily means that *wyrd* in other contexts must have the same interpretation. Taking a more extreme position, A. P. Wolf denies that *wyrd* retains any
meaning of “fatum” or anything else except “event” anywhere in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Like the paganists, Timmer and Wolf insist that their reading of the religious values (and consequent connotations of Old English words) of Old English authors precludes any other possibility.

Timmer also resembles the paganists in that he resorts to interpolation as the only explanation of an instance of wyrd which upsets his paradigm. This is particularly interesting because Timmer generally insists that scholars take the text “as it is,” without assuming, as the paganists often did, that contrary evidence is the result of a Christian redactor. The passage in question occurs in “The Seafarer,” lines 115-16, in which wyrd is juxtaposed with metod (meaning “measurer,” perhaps “fate” or “ruler,” but most often in reference to the Christian God). Timmer argues: “these lines almost certainly do not belong to The Seafarer.” The juxtaposition undermines the near universality suggested by Timmer’s paradigmatic translation of wyrd as post-Christian “lot” or “event.” The passage “as it is” suggests an equation of wyrd ‘Fate’ with a “measurer” or “ruler” which suggests that other interpretations of the meaning of wyrd may be valid.

T. A. Shippey suggests that translators of “Beowulf” translate wyrd as “the course of events” in every instance, claiming “the more impersonal translation saves one from strange conflicts between Fate and Doom, or God and Fate” (40). But the conflict may have been intentional or meaningful, particularly within “Beowulf.” This study takes a position similar to the the third group writing about wyrd, those who believe that many meanings might have been possible during the different stages of the Anglo-Saxon period (including after conversion), and some simultaneously. Considering what we do not
know about the Anglo-Saxons, this seems an appropriate approach. Moreover, considering what we do know about the Anglo-Saxons, an approach which accepts Christianist as well as other possibilities, including Germanic possibilities, is valid.

Anglo-Saxon culture is a fusion of Germanic and Christian elements and traditions, and we may expect many of their texts to reflect a similar blend. Because the translation of wyrd and its cognates is crucial in interpreting the textile imagery associated with it, an overview of its appearances within Old English literature may be useful.

In most of its occurrences in Old English literature, particularly in later prose, wyrd (or, more commonly in homiletic texts, gewyrd) is an “event” or “happening.” This easy translation works most of the time in Old English texts. However, translating wyrd is more problematic in the glossaries, some prose, and some poetry. In the glossaries, wyrd renders a variety of Latin words, the most common of which include Fortuna (“fortune” or “Fortuna” goddess of fortune, eleven times), fatum/fata (“fate” or “destiny” / “Fates,” ten times), Parcae (“the Fates,” eight times), sors/condicio (“lot” or “destiny” / “circumstances,” five times), fors (“chance,” four times), eventus (“event,” three times), and casus (“event” or “chance,” three times). While glossaries often reflect the source text more than the Old English context, the glossarial evidence suggests the range of wyrd.

Other controversial uses of wyrd which occur in prose seem to be allusions to unorthodox beliefs. Translations by Alfred will be discussed in a later section, but Ælfric’s homily “VIII Idvs Ianvarii Epiphania Domini” demonstrates an unusual context (for later Old English homiletic prose) in which wyrd or gewyrd does not seem to mean
an “event.” The homily in question is a discourse on the signs of the birth of Jesus, in particular, the great star which shone in the heavens as a sign of dumb creation’s recognition of the birth of its creator. In the midst of this discourse, Ælfric debunks an unorthodox interpretation of the star: that stars determine the fate of each man, including Jesus, and that “þurh heora ymbrynum him wyrd gelimpe” (“and by their course [the stars], wyrd befalls him” i.e. “one’s destiny is determined by the course of the stars”).

Ælfric’s rebuttal is that good Christians must cast such a belief from their hearts, since the only gewyrde that might be real, beyond God’s foreordination, is according to the “geearnungum” (“merits”) of each man (VII.120-22). The problem with the unorthodox belief is that some “stunte menn” (“foolish men”) say that “hi be gewyrde lybban sceolon: swilce god hi neadige to yfeldædum” (“they must live according to gewyrde, as if God compels them to evil deeds”) (VII.137-38). Thus, they justify their own actions by appealing to the inexorability of their gewyrde.

Ælfric’s interpretation of gewyrde itself is that “gewyrde nis nan þing buton leas wena: ne nan þing soðlice be gewyrde ne gewyrð” (“gewyrde is nothing but a false hope: nothing truly comes about through gewyrde”) (VII.182-83). With this heresy addressed, Ælfric can turn from the “leasan wenan þe ydele menn gewyrð hatað” (“the false hope which worthless men call gewyrde”) back to the gospel story (VII.199-200). I have left wyrd and gewyrde untranslated to illustrate a point. To insert “event” or even “course of events” in every translation makes very little sense. Ælfric is probably not alluding to “Fate,” nor is he discussing “divine providence” (which would not be a “false hope”). Even this late in the period and at a point at which we know the Anglo-Saxons to be
completely Christianized, the word *gewyrd* is related to some kind of popular belief in “fate” or “destiny,” in this case, related to the courses of the stars. Thus, the word which most often means “event” in homiletic contexts must still retain a sense of “fate” understandable to Ælfric’s audience. The usage of *wyrd* or *gewyrd* in the homily suggests that multiple connotations of the word (including “destiny” or “fate”) cannot be blamed solely on an early date of composition, since Ælfric is writing to a tenth-century audience.

*Wyrd* seems to have the most controversial range of meaning in poetry. Here I shall restrict my examination of *wyrd* to “Beowulf,” since it is one of the poetic texts in which textiles are also associated with “fate,” and it contains some of the most hotly contested meanings for *wyrd*. *Wyrd* as perceived by the characters of “Beowulf” is particularly complex. Beowulf says of *wyrd*, “Gað a wyrd swa hio sceal!” (“Fate ever proceeds as it/she must”) (455b). *Wyrd* is a feminine noun, and this causes the choice of pronoun. Beowulf’s acceptance of *wyrd* as absolute is a hallmark of his consistent fatalism: when Beowulf recounts his swim with Breca he adds, “Wyrd oft nereð / unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah!” (“Fate often protects the undoomed man, when his courage is good”) (572b-73).

More often, however, *wyrd* brings death rather than life. As Hrothgar says of his kinsmen, “hie wyrd forsweop / on Grendles gryre” (“fate swept them away during Grendel’s violence”) (477b-478a). Similar phrasing appears several more times in the poem. The narrator describes the death of Hygelac by saying “hyne wyrd fornarn” (“fate seized him”) (1205b). Beowulf says, “ealle wyrd forsweop / mine magas to metodsceafte” (“fate swept all my men away at the decree of the measurer [i.e. ‘to
Beowulf recognizes that his life is also subject to the decree of fate as he approaches his final battle, and he says, "ac unc [furður] sceal / weorðan æt wealle, swa unc wyrd geteōð, / Metod manna gehwæs" ("but afterwards, for us two at the wall it shall be as fate, the ruler of each man rules for us") (2525b-27a). The figure of *wyrd* seems to Hrothgar and, more particularly, to Beowulf an active force in the universe, one that Beowulf considers the "ruler" or "measurer" of men, or at least of their deaths. Thus, when the narrator states, "him wyrd ne gescraf / hreō æt hilde" ("fate did not ordain victory in battle for him") (2574b-75a), we know that Beowulf is about to die. Indeed, after Beowulf's fatal battle with the dragon, the narrator informs us that:

```
wyrd ungemete neah,
se ðone gomelan  gretan sceolde,
secean sawle hord,  sundur gedælan
lif wið lice;  no þon lange wæs
feorh æþelinges  flæsce bewunden.15 (2420b-24)
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*Wyrd* is an eerie figure in "Beowulf" who sometimes seems personified as the grim reaper, as in this instance. While it does not follow that *wyrd* is necessarily a personified figure of Germanic (or classical) Fate in "Beowulf," it is a possible inference, particularly since the narrator also alludes to the paganism of his characters and their culture.

Other references in "Beowulf" place *wyrd* in hostile subjection to the Christian God. The opposition is also introduced by the narrator, who reminds the audience that whatever Hrothgar and Beowulf might think rules over them, the Christian God truly reigns. The narrator remarks that Beowulf was able to stop the *geosceæfigast* ("demon sent by fate") Grendel (1266) from killing more men in *spite* of fate: "swa he hyra ma wolde, / nefne him witig God  wyrd forstode / ond ðæs mannes mod.  Metod eallum
weold / gumena cynnes, swa he nu git deð” (“as he wished more of them, except wise God and the power of that man had opposed that fate for them. The Lord ruled all of humankind, as he still does now”) (1055b-58). Thus, the narrator aligns grim wyrd with Grendel, rather an odd figure to be connected with Christian providence. The narrator is also the only voice in “Beowulf” to use wyrd as a common noun “event,” in lines 734 and 3030, and also in apposition to geosceaf or “decree of old” (1233). The context of “Beowulf” alone indicates that the range of meanings associated with wyrd is complex and may include personifications of a fatal kind. Although serious conflict has been attached to every occurrence and possible translation of wyrd mentioned in “Beowulf,” what no scholar has been able to prove is that wyrd categorically cannot have the several roles of personified and/or Christian fate, death, and event. These possibilities and range of meaning are important in analyzing the connection between wyrd and weaving.

**WEAVING OF FATE, CREATION, AND THE FORCES OF NATURE**

*Wyrd* is the word for “fate” most commonly associated with weaving among the Old English textile metaphors. The only textile metaphor for “fate-weaving” which does not mention wyrd occurs in “Beowulf,” as the narrator informs his audience of the Geats’ eventual success at Heorot, “Ac him Dryhten forgeaf / wigspeda gewiøfu” (“But the Lord granted them webs of fortunate destiny in war”) (696b-97a). The term gewiøfu or gewif (“web,” “web of destiny”) is etymologically connected to gewewan “to weave”16 and is elsewhere used alongside wyrd as a gloss to Fortuna.17 God grants the happy fate in battle to the Geats, and that fate is disposed in some way through weaving.

Several works within *The Exeter Book* also connect fate and weaving through a
weaving *wyrd*. The first instance of fate-weaving occurs as Guðlac’s servant mourns the time when, *wefen wyrd-stafum*, his lord must depart from life (1351a). The servant implicitly links these “woven decrees of fate” with the death of Guðlac. Thus *wyrd* is to some degree personified as a metaphorical weaver who brings about the timing of men’s deaths through weaving a decree. The image of fate as a metaphorical weaver continues in the “Riming Poem,” in which the narrator states similarly that “me þæt wyrd gewæf ond gewyrht forgeaf” (“Fate wove it for me and gave (me) the work”) to dig a grave and prepare for death (70). Once again, *wyrd* as fate appears as one assigning death to others in the guise of a weaver. This role as death-bringer is consistent with the other portraits of *wyrd* in “Beowulf” and several other poetic texts.

A final instance comes in Riddle #35, as the “mailcoat” speaker indicates, “Wyrmas mec ne awæfan *wyrd* cræftum, / þa þe geolo godwebb *geatwum frætwað*” (9-10) (“silkworms did not weave me with the marvellous skill of the fates, those who adorn the fine yellow cloth with ornaments [embroidery?]”). The riddle, found in *The Exeter Book* as well as a Northumbrian manuscript, is, for the most part, a translation of Aldhelm’s Latin Riddle #33. But the Old English versions do not mirror the Latin text in their reference to the weaving skills of the *wyrd*, or singular *wyrdi* in the Northumbrian version. The Latin version of these lines reads: “Nec crocea Seres texunt lanugine vermes” (“nor do Chinese silk-worms weave me from their yellow floss”). This unique allusion to weaving fate(s) in the Old English versions is consistent with the imagery of woven or weaving fate in the other poems of *The Exeter Book*. Perhaps the textile associations throughout the riddle (in both languages) may also be related to Aldhelm’s or
his translator’s awareness of the traditional Old English phraseology in calling the byrnie or mailshirt a garment “woven” with skill.\textsuperscript{30}

What may be another textile association with \textit{wyrd} occurs in “Solomon and Saturn.” During their “knowledge” contest, Saturn asks Solomon: “hwæt beoð ða feowere \( fægæs \) rapas?” (“What are the four cords of the fated?”) (333), and Solomon replies, “Gewurdene \( wyrda \), / ðæt beoð ða feowere \( fægæs \) rapas” (334-35) (“The manifested fates, those are the four cords of the fated”).\textsuperscript{21} Exactly what the “cords” in question are in relation to the \textit{wyrd}a is unclear, but the image of threads and binding may well be a textile image.

It is natural to wonder what the Anglo-Saxons meant when using such metaphors. Since both Germanic and classical mythologies include fate goddesses who spin and weave (analogues which will be addressed in a later section), are Anglo-Saxon authors consciously alluding to mythical weaving Fates? The weaving of fate has long been a factor which paganists use to link Germanic mythology directly with Anglo-Saxon belief. On the other hand, Stanley states, “Brand points out with justice that \textit{wyrd} in the Anglo-Saxon sources is never actually engaged in weaving or any other sedentary occupation, and that, far from it, \textit{wyrd} acts entirely in the manner of men within the epic tradition.”\textsuperscript{22} What Stanley or Brand mean, I am at a loss to determine, given textual examples to the contrary. Dorothy Whitelock’s interpretation is something of a compromise between Germanic and Christian claims:

\begin{quote}
though there are passages where some degree of personification is present, such as ‘the creation of the fates changes the world under the heavens’ or
\end{quote}
‘woven by the decrees of fate’, I doubt if these are more than figures of speech by the time the poems were composed. If they are inherited from the heathen past, they may indicate that men then believed in a goddess who wove their destiny, but the poet who says ‘to him the Lord granted the webs of victory’ is unconscious of a heathen implication in his phrase.\textsuperscript{23} Whitelock’s interpretation is the most probable of the three given, although the poet’s awareness of the metaphor’s initial meaning is rather open to question.

The consistent use of this imagery suggests that, despite possible fossilization, more than one Anglo-Saxon writer considered the notion of fate as a personified weaver a metaphor which would not require explanation. Perhaps since \textit{wyrd} is grammatically feminine, whether as a remembered pagan goddess or a gendered Christian providence, she is given duties performed by mortal women within Anglo-Saxon culture. Or perhaps Germanic and/or classical analogues suggested a connection between \textit{wyrd} and weaving to the Anglo-Saxons. Whatever the source of the metaphorical personification, it was meaningful to the Anglo-Saxons to the extent that it was utilized as a poetic metaphor on repeated occasions.

\textit{The Exeter Book} also contains a reference to creation-weaving. The narrator of Riddle \#40, personified “creation,” describes its influence and generation: “\textit{ic uttor eapeal ymbwinde, / wrætlice gewefen wundorcræfie}” (“I easily hold or wind around outside all things, wondrously woven with marvellous power”) (84-85). “Creation” acts in concert with God, whose power alone it respects, as it winds and is woven through all the world. This cosmic weaving is similar to the weaving of another personified force of
nature. Riddle #84 mentions a “moddor” (21a) or mother-figure of great beneficence, “hæt wuldor wifeð, worldbœarna mægen” (“who powerfully weaves the glory of the children of the world”) (33). The figure, generally identified as “water,” is being personified as a female, and it is an interesting correspondence that she accomplishes her role through weaving. Both riddles are closely related to other Old English and Anglo-Latin riddles on the same themes.  

OTHER POTENTIAL ASSOCIATIONS IN OLD ENGLISH WITH FATE-WEAVING

Other words and images occur in Old English literature which may be related to wyrd and textile imagery. As previously indicated, the term metod almost universally means “God” in Old English texts. However, the word had a pre-Christian meaning which has not been easy to identify. Etymologically, metod is related to metan “to measure” and “allot.” It has been repeatedly suggested that metod is another name for “fate.” There is good evidence this may be the case in some Old English poems, and if so, the connection may also be related to textile metaphor.

In “Beowulf,” the narrator twice seems to connect metod or closely related words with wyrd. First, metod seems to be placed in apposition to wyrd: Beowulf’s destiny is to be “swa unc wyrd geteod, / Metod manna gehwæs” (“as fate ordains for us, the ruler of every man”) (2526b-27a). In addition, Beowulf tells Wiglaf that wyrd has taken all of their kinsmen to metodsceafte, to “death” or “the decree of fate” (2814b-15). The importance of this equation of metod and wyrd is that it may suggest a personification of wyrd as a ruling power in these given texts. Timmer, however, argues that the apposition of 2526b-27a can only mean that wyrd has become a vague kind of “lot” that is equated to
God because it is subsumed to his will. In contrast, Fred C. Robinson asserts, “In the compound *metodsceaf*, used once by Wealhtheow and once by the dying Beowulf, *metod* can only mean ‘fate,’ and the simplex *metod* in 2527 is forced to have a predominantly pagan meaning because it is placed in apposition to *wyrd*.”

Many have argued that the other references in the poem to *metod*, the pagan characters’ references to “God,” contradict the *metod-wyrd* connection. However, it is also possible that when Beowulf and Hrothgar invoke *metod*, whom they trust, they are invoking an older “god” and that both meanings are operative in the minds of the audience, who know that their pagan heroes are hardly likely to be speaking of the Christian God (670, 967, 979, 1778, 2527). The narrator also distinguishes between the true *metod* and *wyrd*, then the false *metod*. The first distinction occurs at lines 1055b-57a, which (as has already been cited) state *wyrd* would have brought about the death of more warriors through Grendel if God had not prevented it. The narrator adds, “Metod eallum weold / gumena cynnes, swa he nu git deð” (“The Lord ruled all of the races of men, as he now does still”) (1057b-58). In the second instance, the narrator once again indicates that the fateful spirits (Grendel and Grendel’s Mother) were not allowed to kill Beowulf, but were circumvented by the God of all creation, “*bæt is soð Metod*” (“that is the true God”) (1611b). The line may also mean “that is a righteous God,” but it would make sense for the narrator to distinguish the true God from the false *metod* of past dialogue, whoever it was.

*The Exeter Book*’s “The Seafarer” equates *wyrd* and *metod* (line 115), and the context of *metod* in “Waldere” (19) has also suggested the strong possibility that *metod*
was once a word for “fate.” The related word *metodsceaf*, as has already been indicated, is linked to *wyrd* in “Beowulf,” as “death” or “decree of fate.” and it carries the same meaning in its other occurrences where it is not directly linked to *wyrd.* Why would the decree of a Christian *Metod* always be associated with death? The *metod* of *metodsceaf* would be more probably related to *wyrd*, as a death-bringer.

Alfred’s translation of Boethius’ *De Consolatione* gives further evidence of a possible relationship of *wyrd* and *metod*. During Orpheus’ journey to Hades, he meets several mythological figures, including the *Parcae*. Alfred explains that they are: “ða graman metena [or *gydena* in a variant manuscript] ðe folcisce men hatað Parcas, ða hi secgað ðæt on nanum men nyton nane are, ac æelu men wrecen be his gewyrhtu; þa hi secgað ðæt walden ælces mannæ wyrde” (“the grim Fates [goddesses] whom secular people call the Parcae, those that they say know no reverence for any man, but they punish each man according to his works; these they say are those who rule the fate of each man”). The Old English word *metena* belongs to the same word family as *metod* and can be translated similarly as “measurers.” Moreover, *metena* or “metten” (as most etymologists designate the nominative singular form of feminine accusative plural *metena*) may be the feminine form of *metod*. Friedrich Kluge indicates that *metod* itself is formed from *mēt* + the nominative agent suffix -up. The feminine form, according to the paradigm for *god/gyden* ("god/goddess") or *peow/peowen* ("male slave/female slave"), would be *met-up-injō-* or syncopated *met-i-en* or *meten*. Alfred’s use of *metena* to explain the *Parcae* suggests that the idea of deities who measure fate was not foreign to at least some of the Anglo-Saxons. Moreover, although *metod* became the
Christian God very early in the Anglo-Saxon period, earlier connotations of *metod* may have been very close to those of *wyrd*, as the potential conflation of *wyrd* and *metod* in scattered poetic texts, the unusual usage of *metod* in compounds, and what seems to be its feminine form may indicate.

Evidence for the correlation between *metod* and “fate” beyond these textual clues occurs in analogical cultures, in which *metod* is *mjotur* (Old Icelandic “fate”) and *metod* (Old Saxon “fate, creator, God”).\(^{37}\) The word *metod* may also have a connection to textiles, referring to a “measurer” of lots or threads of life. Greek as well as Germanic analogues to be discussed shortly indicate that the role of “measurer” of the spinning and weaving threads of a life “span” comprised part of the overall role of Fate or the Fates. If *metod* once had a connection to *wyrd*, a similar “measurer” may have existed among the Anglo-Saxons.

A final piece of evidence which may connect fatal figures and textiles among the Anglo-Saxons is the written and visual text of the Franks Casket, one of the oldest textual artifacts known in the Old English corpus (seventh century). On the right panel of the casket (see Figure 4A), three hooded figures stand on the far right side with something resembling an orb in their hands and trailing threads or ropes falling below.\(^{38}\) Past speculation on their identity has neglected an important fact: based on their clothing, they are women. Gale Owen points out that they are wearing the “usual feminine head-dress, consisting of a voluminous hood, and a long garment.”\(^{39}\) Although men were also known to wear hooded cloaks, they would be wearing shorter garments than the figures in question. Gale Owen-Crocker notes that the women are peculiar in the details of their
Figure 4A: The Franks Casket
dress in that their hoods are pointed, unlike the hoods of the other two females depicted (Beaduhild and an attendant on another panel). The unusual women stand next to a barrow over which a grieving figure and a horse stand.

The inscription on the casket runs as follows: “Her Hos sitæb on hærmbergæ, / agl[.] drigib, swæ hiri Ertae gisgraf / særden sorgæ and sefa tornæ” (“Here sits a company (or Hos) on the evil barrow; she endures misery, as Ertae ordained for her, heart rendered miserable and aggrieved.” Since the casket includes depictions of a Roman legend, of Germanic legends such as Weland’s torment and revenge, and of the adoration of the Magi, it is difficult to pinpoint from which tradition(s) this legend derives. One convincing if inconclusive suggestion is that the images are linked to the Sigurd cycle of Germanic legend. Thus, Sigurd’s famous horse Grani mourns alongside a female figure, perhaps his wife Gudrun or valkyrie-lover Brynhild. This might explain the odd warrior-figures to the left as Gudrun’s brothers, Sigurd’s killers. Or perhaps the scene is that of a prototypical mourning wife and horse, with companions nearby to celebrate funeral rites. Either context would explain the bulk of the inscription and the images on the panel. What remains unexplained, however, is the cluster to the right, as well as the remainder of the inscription.

The women with unusual headdresses are associated with the death-barrow, which, as mentioned in Chapter 3, is a liminal place commonly associated in Germanic cultures with other-worldly experiences during which a mortal (usually a mourner) sees mythic or, in post-Christian terms, demonic beings such as valkyries or fate-spirits. Two other pieces of evidence which may shed light on their identity are the inscription and
their actions in the scene. The inscription is vague, but it links Ertae with gisgraf, which I read as gescraf. The verb gescrifan “to ordain, allot, provide for” is a word very commonly associated with wyrd. In the Old English corpus, the verb form gescrael/gescraf only appears five times, three of those times as wyrd gescrael/gescraf. Ertae is not attested elsewhere and its meaning is obscure, although Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie comments that the word is “evidently a feminine proper name.” The evidence suggests that these women may be fatal figures. Few commentators have noticed that they also seem to be spinning or unrolling a ball of thread with their hands. The two women in profile have one hand near the top and another near the bottom of the rope-threads, which suggests that they are drawing down the threads from the ball which the central figure may or may not be holding (her actions behind the others are more difficult to see). The evidence is suggestive of mythic women engaged in symbolic spinning or weaving. A more difficult question would be which mythology is illustrated by their actions, since, as analogues will demonstrate, both classical and Germanic mythologies contain references to spinning and weaving fates.

Although wyrd is generally singular, Bede provides information that the Anglo-Saxons worshipped at least one group of goddesses during the pagan period. In Bede’s account of the important festivals of the pagan period, he lists one celebrated by the Anglo-Saxons on December 25th which he says was known as “Mothers’ Night” or “Modranect.” Gale Owen connects the earth mother goddesses worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons on Modranect to the pan-Germanic Fates and indicates that they were well-known in Germanic lore as hooded figures. She then suggests that these may also be the three
mysterious figures spinning on the Franks' casket. Whatever the source and connection of the three spinning women on the Franks Casket, they may indicate that a triad of spinning "weird women" was familiar to at least some of the Anglo-Saxons.

**GERMANIC TEXTILE GODDESSES AND FATES**

Growing archaeological evidence of recent date has added to what has been known of Germanic textile goddesses. Continental Germanic finds of sixth-century gold bracteates, generally found as ornamental grave goods, depict figures of pagan deities which may be related to cosmic spinners and weavers. One group of bracteates has excited particular interest because of its depiction of what seems to be a textile goddess. Four of the bracteates were discovered in Germany and one in Denmark. The variant of the group (one of the German bracteates) shows a goddess with either a spindle or a weaving sword, while the other four show a goddess with one or both of two strange tools either in her hand or near her. The two implements resemble a staff with cross bars at top and bottom and a small double cross which may be on a stand. Michael J. Enright suggests that the small double cross is a swift, a fortuitous suggestion which explains the puzzling tool's appearance at all the different angles of presentation in each of the bracteates. Enright considers the longer object, the pole with cross bars, a weaver's beam, with the cross bars representing either cranks on each end with which the weaver wound the top of the web, or else pegs which held the loom beam within the two uprights. However, the longer tool also sounds as though it could represent a tall distaff such as the flax distaff, on which a bottom cross bar could represent the base and a top cross bar a peg or platform on which the unspun flax is dressed. Either way, the tools in
association with a deity suggest a very early existence of worship of textile goddesses among the Germanic peoples.

Although Byzantine coinage is an influence on the bracteates, most of the bracteates "demonstrate a highly divergent process of adaptation based on themes of Germanic religion and not one based on a copying of those of the Mediterranean." Moreover, of the five bracteates, two are associated with known pagan cult sites in Germany, a high percentage in so small a group. Most of the grave goods associated with the find at Oberwerschen (one of the two cultic sites) showed further relation to spinning and weaving and included a spindle whorl, a silver needle, "a goddess-with-spindle bracteate under her chin," scissors, and a knife. Other finds associated with the bracteates included weaving swords, which Enright comments were "regarded as a female status symbol by Germanic peoples like the Lombards and Bavarians especially during the sixth century" and the Thuringians and the Anglo-Saxons. Enright also suggests that finds on weaving goddesses in Germanic and Danish settings show an "element of continuity [with later Germanic literary sources] that is especially impressive . . . the reason probably lies in the fact that it depends on a durable technology, that of weaving and the upright loom."

Archaeological evidence suggests that the upright loom in question, the warp-weighted loom, was probably invented in the area of present day Hungary around 5500 BC, after which it spread north and west across Europe. The Greeks learned its use from native, non-Indo-European inhabitants of the Balkans, and it may be presumed that the Germanic peoples did as well. If the durable technology of weaving or even
spinning associated with women and goddesses derives from the appearance of that technology among the Indo-Europeans, then the idea of textile goddesses may be very old. Other archaeological evidence for Germanic textile goddesses includes, "the name Vabusoa 'weaveress' for a Germanic goddess, on a Roman inscription."\textsuperscript{56} As it does for the material culture of Anglo-Saxon textile production, archaeology presents early glimpses of what was probably a much larger picture. The textual picture of Germanic textile goddesses reveals much more information at a much later date.

The oldest Germanic textual analogue to be discussed, a synthesis of the Gospels in Old Saxon called the \textit{Heliand}, is similar in language, culture, and time period to the early Old English corpus. Contact between the Saxons and Anglo-Saxons is demonstrable, and the \textit{Heliand} is considered a true analogue.\textsuperscript{57} Written in the first half of the ninth century in Old Saxon by an anonymous author, the \textit{Heliand} shares many common features of Old English poetry, including use of alliterative half-lines and poetic formulae.\textsuperscript{58} The \textit{Heliand} is useful in the conflict over \textit{wyrd} because similar usage of the cognate in Old Saxon provides a comparison for the problematic word in Old English. Although like "Beowulf," it is undoubtedly written by a devout Christian, the \textit{Heliand} gives strong evidence that the author uses native terminology (including the pagan word for temple, among others) to help the Saxons learn the Gospels in terms they understand. Thus, Old Saxon \textit{uurd} simultaneously alludes to a pre-Christian image \textit{as well as} a post-Christian figure subsumed by the greatest God, the God of the Christians.\textsuperscript{59} In this context, we find an angel telling Zacharias about his son John's unusual calling in the world, indicating that "so habed im uurdgiscapu / metod gimarcod endi maht godes"
The text associates *uurd* and *metod* and then differentiates both from the power of God, as does "Beowulf." In the description of Anna at the temple, the two words are similarly conflated: "Tho gefraign ic that iru thar sorga gistod, / that sie thiu mikila maht metodes tedelda, / uured uurdigiscapu" ("Then I have heard it told that sorrow came to her, that the mighty power of the Measurer separated them, the cruel workings of fate") (39.511b-12).  

Another parallel between Old English and Saxon usage is that *uurd* is also a death-bringer: "uurd fornam / Herodes thana cuning" ("fate took Herod the king") (55.761b-62a). Likewise, the poor widow’s son is her only happiness until "anttat ina iru uurht benam, / mari metodogescapu" ("until fate took him from her, the great Measurer’s doings") (155.2189-90). In this passage, *metod* is then placed in opposition to Christ, who chooses to raise her son from the dead: the widow “fell at Christ’s feet and praised the people’s Chieftain before the crowd, because He had protected a life-spirit so dear to her against the workings of the Measurer” or “metodigisceftie” (154.2210a). Fate in the form of *uurd* and occasionally *metod* is the measurer for the sinner; when death comes for Lazarus, the poor man of the parable, Lazarus is informed of “reganogiscapu” ("the decisions or workings of the ruler"), but his wicked, rich neighbor is called to death through "uurdegiscapu" ("the decisions or workings of fate") (231.3347b, 3354b). The use of *uurd* is also similar to *wyrd* in that *uurd* can also be translated as "events" in some contexts, such as when Judas “thea uurdi farsihit” ("sees these events") (313.4581b), meaning the results of his actions in betraying his Lord, and
responds by taking his life.

As in "Beowulf" and other Old English texts, when the Saxon *uurd* carries any sense of F(f)ate about it, it is nonetheless subjugated to God’s power. Twice in the *Heliand*, Jesus says “Thiu uurd is at handun” (315.4619b; 325.4778b), both times in reference to his impending death. The full context of his words indicates that *uurd* occurs here as the will of God, “Fate is at hand, so that everything will go just as God the Father in His might has determined it.” Thus, at Jesus’ death, fate approaches (in wording which reminds one of Beowulf’s death) as an extension of God’s will: “Thiu uurth nahida thu, / mari maht godes  endi middi dag, / that sia thia ferahquala frummian scoldun” (“Fate was coming closer then, the great power of God, and midday, when they were to bring His life-spirit to its death agony”) (364.5394b-96). What the striking similarities between the *wyrd*-usage in both Old English poetry and the Old Saxon *Heliand* may indicate is that similar layers of meaning for the word *wyrd-uurd* were present in a closely related culture, including the sense of Fate and the association of *metod* the “measurer” with *wyrd*.

Unlike the *Heliand*, the *Poetic Edda* or *Edda Saemundar* of Norse origin is far less likely to be a direct analogue for the Anglo-Saxons, although the work was probably composed (orally) before the Icelandic conversion to Christianity in 1000 A.D. (given its strongly pagan character), and contact existed between the two cultures. The text as we have it, however, was most probably written down after 1100; the manuscript dates from the 1270’s. The account in the opening poem, *Voluspá*, gives the genesis of the Germanic fates. From the gathering of the gods come three women from “the lake which
stands under the tree,” known as Urthr’s well. They allot the fates of men and are known as Urth, Verthandi, and Skuld. The shapings of the three goddesses, “scopom norna” (“decrees of the norns”) settle everything.

The reactions of the heroes of Germanic legend towards these “grimmar urðir” (“grim Fates”) are a study in fatalism. Following the prophecies of Gripir, Helgi says, “one can’t overcome fate.” Although both Brynhild and Gudrun rage against the “hateful noms,” and Gudrun even tries to kill herself contrary to their decree, both ultimately must submit to the norns’ decrees concerning them. As Hamdir states in the “Lay of Hamdir,” “after the norns have given their verdict, no man outlasts the evening.” Some confusion prevails in the depiction of the Germanic Fates. When Fafnir tells Sigurd about norns, he says they are more than three in number, and come from “very different tribes . . . some are of the Æsir, some are of the elves, some are daughters of Dvalin.” In the “Lay of Regin,” Andvari says, “a nom of misfortune shaped my fate,” an allusion which leaves one wondering which kind of nom is which.

Like the fatal figures of other cultures, the Norns are associated with textiles. Thus, Frey’s servant Skirnir says, “on one day all my life was shaped, all my span laid down.” The fatal spinners are visible in their association with the birth of Helgi Hundingsbani: “Night fell on the place, the norns came, those who were to shape fate for the prince.” After describing the kind of life he will have, they “twisted very strongly the strand of fate [œrlogþatto] . . . they prepared the golden thread and fastened it in the middle of the moon’s hall.” Regin also says of Sigurd that “the web of his fate” [œrlogsímo] spreads across several lands. Other interesting textile imagery in the
Poetic Edda includes the name of heaven among the Vanir (as told by the Giant Alvis to Thor), "vindofni" or "The Weaver of Winds." In another episode, Brynhild meets a giantess on her way to Hel who tells her "it would befit you better to be at your weaving." In the original, this reads, "betr semði þér böða at rekia," which strongly resembles the The Exeter Book Maxims I statement, "færne æt hyre bordan geriseð" ("a woman belongs at her embroidery") (63b).

The Norse poem probably contains common, Germanic cultural elements and pre-Christian beliefs that pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons might have known. The heroic legends told in the Poetic Edda were even more likely known to the Anglo-Saxons who wrote "Beowulf," "Waldere," "Widsið," and "Deor," since they mention some of the same characters. But which religious elements were held in common with the Anglo-Saxons is difficult to say. The existence of a strong connection between the urðir and the spinning and weaving of fate is rather suggestive, at least, given other analogues in archaeology and print.

Snorri Sturluson's Edda (the Prose Edda), which draws on the Poetic Edda, was written between 1179-1241. Snorri explains that the three maidens who dwell with the gods are Weird, Verdandi, and Skuld, and that they "shape men's lives"; however, "There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin" or elvish and dwarfish origin. Some mortals are allotted bad fate and others good because "Good norns, ones of noble parentage, shape good lives, but as for those people that become the victims of misfortune, it is evil norns that are responsible." His work further indicates that there is some confusion of valkyries and
norns; after listing valkyries, including Hild and Skuld, the text identifies them, "They are called norns who shape necessity." Snorri's work is obviously too late to be considered a source for Old English literature. However, because it harmonizes and explains older material, the prose Edda sheds some light on Old Norse texts more likely to be analogues to Old English literature.

Another late Germanic analogue is Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, which is written in Latin, but which, through ubiquitous references to *fata*, also retains the strong touch of fatalism present in the literatures of peoples of Germanic origin. Thus, a character is told fate "has not dispensed your doom." The great warrior Starkather sings a poem with words, "The Fates gave a child to Frothi" and later another poem with words, "Fate, / as I recall, appointed me at my birth / to pursue battle and fall in battle." In another sung poem, Hildiger indicates, "Whatever foreknown links are fastened by the Fates, / whatever the mysteries of divine reason sketch out, / whatever events are foreseen and held in the sequence / of destiny, no change in our transitory world will cancel." The *Parcae* and the *fata* are equated in this instance. Hilda Ellis Davidson finds the use of these fatal figures to be in keeping with other Germanic sources: "Reference to the Fates is in agreement with similar allusions to the Norns in Icelandic poetry as the controllers of the destiny of men from their birth."

The *Gesta Danorum* also offers an interesting glance at the "pre-Christian" worship of the Fates. King Fridleif visits the "oracles of the Fates," the "Parcarum oracula," to obtain predictions about his son's life, and "having offered solemn vows approached the goddesses' temple in prayer; here, peering into the shrine, he recognised
the three maidens sitting in their respective seats.98 Although these three maidens are
difficult to identify (are they the oracles or the goddesses themselves?), their promises
and predictions to Fridleif come true, including the negative prophecies of the third
maiden (the inexorable third figure). Did the Germanic peoples worship the Fates as
Fridleif seems to do? Are the cultic artifacts of textile goddesses related to such temples?
In writing his history, Saxo Grammaticus indicates that he is drawing upon older oral and
written sources of Danish history. This suggests the possible significance of the Gesta
Danorum for this study as a late text which nevertheless draws on earlier Germanic
sources to describe legends and religious beliefs of earlier Germanic groups, in particular
the Danes.99 As in both of the Eddas, much of the legendary material describing
Germanic heroes in the Gesta Danorum finds parallels in Old English literature.

The treatment of fate or the Fates in the Gesta Danorum suggests a similar
attitude towards inexorable fate which is consistent with every culture of Germanic origin
in the Middle Ages. Since Saxo Grammaticus was also influenced by classical authors
such as Virgil, some of his depictions of fate or Fates may not be unequivocally Germanic
in nature, but the coincidences of analogical Germanic materials in Old Norse and
archaeological support (as well as Saxo’s obvious pride in his native land and his use of
Germanic source material as well as Latin) do not allow the possibility to be ruled out
that his depictions are as Germanic as he professes. His use of Parcae and fata in
apparent apposition or at least apposition of function also imply an equation or perhaps
confusion of the fatal figures of Roman mythology in their relationship to Germanic fatal
figures.
GREEK AND ROMAN FATES

Perhaps the most famous spinning or weaving Fates are the Greek Moirai. In Greek mythology, the three immortal Fates (Moirai) are female, and they are responsible for assigning people their destinies at birth; they do this by spinning and weaving strands of destiny for each mortal. For example, in the Iliad, Hekabe tells Priam: “Let us sit apart in our palace / now, and weep for Hektor, and the way at the first strong Destiny / spun with his life line when he was born” (XXIV.208-210).100 The role of the fates of traditional Greek mythology is also mentioned by the Phaiakian Alkinoos in the Odyssey: “but there in the future / he shall endure all that his destiny and the heavy Spinners / spun for him with the thread at his birth” (VII.196-198).101 Although Zeus occasionally partakes of the role of weaving destiny, the weaving image associated with the action probably indicates that he has assimilated the function of the female Fates.102

Hesiod (800 B.C.) gives the individual names of the Moirai, their origin, and role as daughters of Night, “Avenging Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, / Who give mortals at birth good and evil to have,” and also who “prosecute transgressions of mortals and gods,” although the latter may indicate a confusion of the Moirai with their sisters the furies (218-220).103 Even the gods have their own “fates” (cf. 468, 479). Hesiod’s equation of the Fates with the will of Zeus (similar to at least once instance in Homer) is mirrored in his explanation that they were some of Zeus’ wives (909-11).104 The Moirai have individual roles within their larger task, as they have individual names. Greek texts also set forth the specific roles of each sister in the triad. “Lachesis” is the measurer and assigner of the lot, Clotho its spinner, and Atropos its weaver and binder. The inexorable
sister is the weaver Atropos, eventually identified as the cutter of the thread of life.¹⁰⁵

The connection of Atropos, and by extension the Moirai with inexorable death is reminiscent of wyrd as death-bringer. Thus, when Charon calls the poet Machon’s character of Philoxenus of Cythera to come away to death, “dark imperious Fate” also calls him.¹⁰⁶ The poet Stobaeus thus describes the Fates with reverence and fear, “ye Fates who sit nearest of Gods to the seat of Zeus and weave with shuttles adamantine numberless and inevitable devices of all manner of counsels, Destiny, Clotho, and Lachesis, Night’s daughters of the goodly arms,—listen to our prayers, ye all-dreaded deities both of heaven and hell.”¹⁰⁷ The Moirai have other similarities to wyrd (as well as the Germanic Fate/s) in that some confusion appears to have surrounded the role of the Moirai in contrast to the gods, Fortune, and Necessity. This confusion is addressed in an anonymous fourth-century Greek papyrus, as the speaker asks what the many-shaped Fortune should be called, “black Clotho or fleet-fate Necessity, or art thou Iris, the messenger.”¹⁰⁸

The Greek Moirai are similar to Old English and Germanic fate figures in other ways. The Moirai are linked to the furies; wyrd is linked to Roman furies as well as Roman Fates, and the Germanic fate figures, the norns, are often confused with valkyries, the equivalent of Roman and Greek furies. The Moirai are also associated with childbirth (as are the norns). In Pindar, Apollo sends all three Moirai with Eleithuia (goddess of childbirth) to the childbirth of Pitana the nymph.¹⁰⁹ In Old English, gebyrd “birth” occurs as a synonym of wyrd.¹¹⁰ Linguistically, the uses of moira and wyrd are also similar in that sometimes moira seems to mean a single “Fate,” and moirai also sometimes means
lower-case "fate" or the "thread spun." Another similarity between the Greek and Germanic fates (and wyrd as well) is the struggle between the male ruling deity and female fate(s) over which supernatural being takes precedence. Other creation figures of Greek mythology spin and weave like the Moirai, as God (weaving "nature") and "water" do in Old English. Detienne and Vernant summarize: "We know that, for the Greeks, the destiny which 'binds' men is 'spun' by the Moirai. Similarly, with its qualities of métis and omniscient cunning, the primordial Power weaves, plaits, links and knots together the threads whose interlacing composes the tissue of Becoming."

Determining which if any Greek texts would have been directly accessible to the Anglo-Saxons is almost impossible. Bede demonstrates a limited knowledge of Greek and Greek texts, and he further informs us that some of the early Christian leaders from Rome brought texts in Greek to England and taught Greek to monastic pupils. These leaders, Theodore and Hadrian, profoundly influenced pupils of the Canterbury school such as Aldhelm. However, the knowledge of Greek does not appear to have been long-lived: "after the generation of students trained by Theodore and Hadrian, there was scarcely a single Anglo-Saxon scholar before the Norman Conquest who could have read a Greek manuscript."

This does not necessarily mean that the influence of Greek ideas did not persist, but tracing the influence is problematic. Unfortunately, we do not know what books Theodore and Hadrian brought, and more unfortunately still, although Greek texts of some age seemed to exist in late monastic libraries even until Leland's time, virtually nothing has survived to the present.

References to Homer's works in Old English texts such as Alfred's version of
Boethius' *De Consolatione* show that the Anglo-Saxons probably had some contact with Greek epic poetry, although through the medium of later classical and Medieval Latin writers. The same medium is probably responsible for their likely awareness of Aesop, a number of important Greek medical texts, and Aristotle, among others. A clear example of such mediated transmission of Greek ideas occurs in the Old English translation of the "The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle," which glosses the names of the Greek Fates used in a Latin source: "Clothos Lachesis Atropos" become *wyrde*. Through the Latin source, the Anglo-Saxon translator of the "Letter" is aware of the names of the Greek Fates and their role as "fate," although the Latin source does not otherwise allude to their role or attributes. Greek ideas would thus have reached the Anglo-Saxons through the profusion of Roman and Medieval Latin texts to which they had access.

The Romans were familiar with Greek texts, and they seem to have understood and equated the Moirai with their Parcae, who started out as minor goddesses of childbirth. The Parcae came to share many of the attributes of the Moirai, including their dispensing of fate through metaphorical spinning and weaving. Scheid and Svensbro describe the Roman Catullus' wedding of Peleus and Thetis in which the Parcae perform a song:

Singing while spinning, the Fates already know as much about the hero as a Homer. They spin his destiny and sing it: 'The left hand held the distaff clothed with soft wool; then the right hand lightly drawing out the threads with upturned fingers shaped them, then with downward thumb twirled the
spindle poised with rounded whirl . . . They then, as they struck the wool,
sang with clear voice, and thus poured forth the Fates in divine chant.
That chant no length of time shall prove untruthful.\textsuperscript{121}

Despite the constructive fates granted the lovers, the Parcae were also considered to be figures of death, as epitaphs illustrate: "stamina ruperunt subito tua candida Parcae" ("The Parcae suddenly broke your shining (warp) threads").\textsuperscript{122} Another inscription reads, "cunctis fila parant Parcae nec par\textless;\textgreater;itur ullis" ("The Parcae dispose the thread for all things; none is spared by them").\textsuperscript{123}

Ovid questions the harshness of the Fates in his own life. He asks "whether a clouded Fate attended my birth" and asks if what "the sisters, mistresses of fate, have ordained, ceases wholly to be under a god's power?"\textsuperscript{124} This "clouded Fate" seems similar to Andvari's "norn of misfortune" in the Poetic Edda. Ovid further suggests that Bacchus, to whom his appeal is addressed, is under their power, "doubtless was the law twice ordained for thee by the Parcae who spun the fated threads at thy double birth."\textsuperscript{125} As he laments his exile, Ovid singles out Lachesis, "Ah! cruel Lachesis, when my star is so ill-fated, not to have granted my life a shorter thread."\textsuperscript{126}

In late Roman times, the role of the Parcae seems to have become thoroughly confused (as was the Greek triad, to some degree) with the several minor deities who took part in the fate of a mortal, including Fortuna and Fata. In particular, "the neuter plural word \textit{fata}—'those things which have been spoken' (therefore equated with destiny)—was reanalyzed as a feminine singular noun (both end in \textit{a}) and consequently personified as a woman. This divine lady Fate then enveloped [sic] a host of identical sisters (the Fates)
and took over the duties and attributes of the Parcae.”

Tracing the availability of classical and later Latin texts to the Anglo-Saxons is considerably easier than tracing the Greek. A great profusion of literature in classical and late Latin exists in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, particularly texts such as the works of the church fathers (Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose), biblical texts and commentaries, psalters, texts by popes such as Gregory, the Apocrypha, and a profusion of saints’ lives, as well as more secular works of Cicero, Virgil and commentaries on Virgil, Horace, Livy, Pliny, Priscian, Statius, Tacitus, and others. More importantly, at least for the purposes of this study, the authors of the Old English corpus had contact with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Ex Ponto.* The Anglo-Saxons also had the Latin works of Isidore of Seville (560-636), including the encyclopedic *Etymologiae.* Isidore’s commentary on *fatum* and the Parcae is as follows:

*Fatum* dicunt esse quicquid diti effantur. *Fatum* igitur dictum a fando, *i.e.*, loquendo. *Tria* autem *fata* finguntur in colo, in fuso, digitisque fila ex lana torquentibus, propter trina tempora: *praeteritum,* quod in fuso jam netum atque involutum est, *praesens,* quod inter digitos nentis trahitur, *futurum* in lana quae colo implicata est, et quod adhuc per digitos nentis ad fusum tanquam praesens ad praeteritum trajiciendum est . . . quas (parcas) tres esse voluerunt, unam quae vitam hominis ordiatur, alteram quae contextat, tertiam quae rumpat.

“*Fatum* is said to be whatever is uttered by the gods. Therefore, *fatum* is named from ‘saying,’ *i.e.* from ‘speaking.’ But the *tria fata* are
represented in a distaff, a spindle, and a thread from wool and twisting fingers, because of the three divisions of time: past, on the grounds that [the thread] is already fastened and rolled on the spindle, present, on the grounds that it is drawn between the fingers of the spinner, future, in the wool which is entwined on the distaff, also because it is cast towards the spindle through the fingers of the spinner, just as the present to the past . . . these (the Parcae) are believed to be three in number, one who begins (lays the warp) the life of man, another who weaves it together, a third who breaks it.” 132

These texts must have given literate Anglo-Saxons an idea of the existence of the spinning and weaving Fates of classical mythology.

Aldhelm makes an association between fate goddesses and textile production which seems likely to be related to these Latin influences. Although it is not translated into Old English, Aldhelm’s Latin riddle #45 (Spindle) associates the Parcae with spinning in their role as fates: “They say that the Parcae decree the fates of men through me—yet severe cold would destroy men if I did not withstand it.” 133 Aldhelm seems aware of the connection between the Parcae and textile production.

The Parcae are also mentioned in another important text, Alfred’s translation of Boethius’ De Consolatione Philosophiae. Alfred’s translation of Boethius has led many to assert that the concept of fate so prevalent in many Old English texts, particularly “Beowulf,” derives entirely from Boethius. 134 They suggest that Alfred’s translation also demonstrates the impossibility that wyrd had any pagan associations attached to it in
Alfred's day because "the Latin Parcae are not translated by Wyrd: in contexts where Parcae occurs the Latin word is taken over directly into the Anglo-Saxon text."\(^{135}\) Rather, wyrd most often glosses fortuna. However, this does not seem a very useful argument, given the confusion of fortuna, fatum, and Parcae in late Roman mythology.

Alfred's choices in translation may have another, more interesting rationale. Assuming Alfred had two Latin words he could translate with wyrd, why choose Fortuna? In De Consolatione, Fortuna is a personified "she" whose "nothingness" is emphasized.\(^{136}\) Good fortune "binds" the minds of men and deceives them, while adversity frees them. Throughout the text, Fortuna is placed in marked contrast to the all-powerful and beneficent God. The De Consolatione argues persuasively that the position of Fortuna in the larger cosmology is as a powerless, personified entity who is under the authority of the great God.\(^{137}\) The Parcae appear only once, on the other hand, as mythological figures along the road to Hades.\(^{138}\) In glossaries, nine of the twenty-four times that Parcae is glossed in Old English, it is glossed as a form of wyrd.\(^{139}\) The dating of these glosses is uncertain, but they suggest that some form of wyrd would have been a semantically acceptable gloss for Parcae within the period. Perhaps Alfred chose to use wyrd for Fortuna because it makes a better theological lesson to people steeped in the tradition of fatalism, whereas the people might not have needed a reminder of an non-Christian tradition of fate goddesses (of whatever origin).

For this assumption to be correct, wyrd would need to be something of a threat to orthodox Christian doctrine. Alfred himself inserts a statement into his translation which suggests it is: "Sume ūðwiotan þæah secgæð, þ[æt] sio wyrd wealde ægðer ge gesælða ge
ungesælða æices monnes. Ic þonne sece, swa swa ealle cristene men secgað, þæt sio godcunde foretiohhung his walde, næs sio wyrd” (“Some wise men say, however, that wyrd rules both the prosperity and misfortune of each man. I say to that, just as all Christian men say, that divine predestination rules him, not wyrd”). This is not to say that Alfred feared the imminent reconstruction of a temple to worship Wyrd, but rather that he might have recognized the superstitious continuance of earlier, non-Christian philosophies in his culture and decided to address it through his translation of Boethius.

Dame Bertha Phillpotts offers an insight along these lines. She suggests that the De Consolatione “might never have been translated by Alfred but for paganism.” She explains further, “W. P. Ker said that Boethius saved the thought of the medieval world. But he could only save it because the ideas of which he treated were fermenting in the minds of the converted barbarians”; “We may well owe the preservation of this work . . . to the fact that it made a bridge between the ancient philosophy of the Nordic peoples and their new religion.” Such an interpretation only confirms the impact of the thought of Boethius on the Anglo-Saxons in their attempt to redefine their notions of the universe in Christian terms.

This impact considered, the De Consolatione is probably not as universal a source of Old English fatalism as many have suggested. For example, responding to the suggestions that Boethius is the source of fatalism in “Beowulf,” Alan H. Roper closely examines the relationship of the Boethian sense of fate in Alfred, compares it to fate in “Beowulf,” and finds that the treatment of fate (or fortune) in each is dissimilar. The fatalism evident in the texts which survive from other Medieval Germanic cultures
indicates, as Phillpotts suggests, that the idea of fate, with all its attached possibilities, existed in the first place, which is why a Latin author such as Boethius would have been so influential in reconciling that fatalism to Christian thinking. The influence of Latin sources on other “fate-weaving” texts in The Exeter Book and “Beowulf” is less certain.

**FATE IN CELTIC, VEDIC, AND OTHER CULTURES**

The texts of another group of neighbors to the Anglo-Saxons, the Celts, demonstrate a similar connection between cosmic operations and textiles (although the influence of classical texts here, as in Anglo-Saxon England, cannot be ruled out). The early text “Prayer for Long Life,” which is attributed to “an abbot Conry in Westmeath named Fer fio (died 762)” includes the lines: “I invoke the seven Daughters of the Sea, / who fashion the threads of the sons of long life.”

A wounded warrior named Congal says, “‘It is the cutting of the thread of life and a change of time to me, that the person from whom I least expected it should thus attack and mutilate me.’” In the tenth-century recension of “The Cattle-Raid of Cooley,” a prophetess appears to warn troops of impending carnage, carrying what seems to be a weaver’s beam and seven strips, “threads woven together, then interpreted to read the future.” Other similarities are found in a triad of Celtic war/fertility goddesses called the Morrigna, who were known as “prognosticators of doom” and who functioned as battle furies who awaited the bodies of the slain as their due. Miranda Green suggests similarities of the triad with both Roman Fates and Germanic valkyries.

A substantial amount of information indicates that the idea of fate-weaving is widespread in Indo-European cultures. Scholars maintain that deities who spin and
weave fate are also common to Hindu and Gypsy mythologies. Richard Onians, for example, cites fate-weaving associations in the Artharva Veda, "'They (goddesses) who spun, wove and stretched the web, let them wrap thee in order to old age; as one long lived, put about thee this garment.'" Perhaps Enright is right in suggesting that, "The proper context for the weaving connection, therefore, would seem to lie in a widespread Indo-European religious conception and not in the field of Germanic alone."

However, the Indo-European sphere is not alone in connecting fatal figures with textile production. Barber thinks the Greeks inherited the mythological associations of the loom and spindle (perhaps also the Fates) from Balkan natives, and according to Neumann, the great goddesses of Egypt, Greece, Germania, and the Mayans all weave, including the fates. The material culture of textile production is the sole commonality (as far as can be determined) connecting all of these groups. Since textile production is generally associated with women, the association between spinning and weaving and female fates is easily explained. It is more difficult to assess the reasons behind the common designation of fatal figures as females. Women's traditional role in pregnancy, childbirth, and child care easily explains the personification of birth goddesses as female, and both classical and Germanic birth goddesses either seem to be related to or identical with fate goddesses; perhaps the association of female and fate arises from this link. Since spinning is a non-stop occupation, any of the women attendant at a birth could have been spinning, which might also have suggested the connection between mortality and a thread, made and removed by women. The umbilical cord would also serve as a visual analogue between the cord of birth and the cord of life. Women's roles in winding cloth
around both newborn children and the dead may have suggested another visual analogue. Perhaps the evolution of a raw thread into a finished web in a loom suggested a metaphor of creation which was then applied to human destiny. Whatever the ultimate reason for the association of fatal figures, women, and textile production, it is remarkable that they are interconnected throughout such a variety of different cultures.

**INTERPRETING ANALOGUES AND SOURCE STUDY**

Interpreting the potential influences of pan-Germanic and classical traditions on Old English fate-weaving is something of a minefield. Caution is critical, given several factors about both Germanic and Greek and Latin sources. The Germanic analogues are generally either sketchy (archaeology) or late (most texts), and variations from one tribal group to the next (e.g. the Norse and the Anglo-Saxon) surely must have existed. Different dates of conversion to Christianity and emerging cultural differentiation make a common picture impossible to create. The Germanic tradition is also at the great disadvantage (in our terms) of being an oral culture before conversion to Christianity. Thus, the only texts which exist are the product of a Christianized people who are in the process of shedding older religious traditions. At the same time, a great deal of what remains in the literature of the Germanic peoples is remarkably similar and occasionally seems identical. The Anglo-Saxons give concrete evidence that they know a number of the heroic legends and values found in German, Danish, and Norse texts. Perhaps the contemporary notion of the isolated “Dark Age” tribes keeps us from remembering that the Northern peoples saw a good deal of the rest of the world and each other.  

While the Greek and Roman traditions of fate have an advantage in their early
appearance in writing, the demonstration of their influence on the Anglo-Saxons can be equally difficult. The Anglo-Saxons did not often provide a bibliography of the works of classical or later Latin origin from which they drew, and so the influence of many texts can only be surmised from apparent similarities of theme or wording. But even when texts seem to have a clear-cut relationship to a source text which they mention, gloss, or are named after, the relationship between the “source” text and Old English text is problematic. Allen Frantzen addresses such difficulties (which apply equally to all “source” texts and analogues) in his book *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*, which includes cautions worth quoting at length.

Frantzen indicates that although the currently popular source projects such as *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici* (which intends to identify “line by line—the sources of all Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose,” meaning Latin sources) have the potential of being very useful, they can also be dangerous.\(^{154}\) “Source criticism” began with the German philological tradition associated with the paganists, and Frantzen suggests it is now being put to the same ends by scholars of a different bias: those interested in finding Latinate sources for as much of Old English literature as possible.\(^{155}\) A project such as the *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* (which extends beyond *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici* to identify all potential Latin sources in Old English literature, including “less clear-cut evidence such as allusions to unnamed sources”) is even more likely to make some of the same mistakes made by the paganists.\(^{156}\)

Frantzen asks important questions, such as what is intended by “source”: “Is the *fons* of the Latin text a ‘beginning,’ a ‘source,’ an ‘origin,’ or a ‘cause’ for the Anglo-
Saxon?\textsuperscript{157} How does source study deal with terms such as the “books known” to the English, considering “knowing books” in that context can mean “to read, recite, listen to, copy, interpret, or remember a book”?\textsuperscript{158} What about the problem posed by source study’s focus on a “literary” tradition in a culture also based on oral tradition and memory?\textsuperscript{159} Frantzen suggests: “the projects emphasize Latin sources in a paradigm of translation that only partially represents evidence from the period. Latin texts are assumed to be the sources of those in the vernacular, as if Anglo-Saxon literary culture ‘progressed’ from Latin to Old English.”\textsuperscript{160} This is not necessarily the way that texts were transmitted in Anglo-Saxon culture. As Frantzen states,

> We know that the textual relations of Anglo-Saxon literary culture were more complex than the simple translation model . . . . Once translated, Latin texts did not disappear; they ‘lived,’ as it were, in two languages . . . . Vernacular texts were sources for Latin texts as late as the twelfth century, when Anglo-Saxon laws were translated into Latin . . . . Moreover, vernacular sources sometimes served as sources for other vernacular texts; and some texts may have had no source apart from inspiration. Some Anglo-Saxon authors such as Ælfric worked regularly in both languages; and King Alfred likewise worked in a world that was officially bilingual.\textsuperscript{161}

However, “The sources projects posit a world of literary relations in which Latin governs vernacular as an older, superior culture determines the lower, newer culture. The intellectual universe of possibilities is Latinate; the sophistication of the vernacular
culture is measured by its ability to recapture and understand Latin." As Frantzen indicates, no simplistic model can account for the complex oral and textual interchange in Anglo-Saxon England. Even in a "borrowing" which seems transparent, such as homiletic material which appears to gloss Latin sections directly, there is not a simple relationship.

Thus, although the temptation to equate classical and/or Germanic fates with Old English *wyrd* imagery is admittedly great, and an analogical relationship between Germanic, Greek, or Latin figures of fate-weaving and Old English fate-weaving may very well exist, the relationships are probably complex. There is also the possibility that the fate-weaving of Old English literature developed out of a unique tradition of its own, since the image of the weaving or spinning of fate has been seen to originate independently in different cultures over time. Whatever its relationship to other sources, the weaving of fate in Old English is probably not a 'mere historical relic' in a cognitive sense, since,

There is nothing 'mere' about historical relics. When categories get extended in the course of history, there has to be some sort of cognitive basis for the extension. And for them to be adopted into the system, that is, 'conventionalized,' they must make sense to the speakers who are making these innovations part of their linguistic system, which is, after all, a cognitive system.163

The metaphor of the weaving of fate had resonance to the Anglo-Saxons, and while we can only guess at the echoes of different cultural traditions which the metaphor held for
them, we can at least appreciate the visual analogue which made the metaphor meaningful, a woman at her spinning and weaving.

Notes

Chapter 4

1. Adherents to this opinion exist to this day. See, for example G. V. Smithers’ “Destiny and the Heroic Warrior in Beowulf,” Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature, ed. James L. Rosier, Janua Linguarum, Series Maior 37 (The Hague: Mouton, 1970) 65-81.

2. Edward B. Irving, Jr., “Christian and Pagan Elements,” A Beowulf Handbook, eds. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, Neb.: UP Nebraska, 1997) 175-92. Irving states, “The ‘mixed’ or ‘blended’ nature of the poem is now agreed on by almost everyone, but scholars differ in how to describe it or account for it--and will always continue to do so, in the absence of more knowledge” (186). Irving’s study on the larger pagan/Christian debate in the context of “Beowulf” surveys the history of this conflict from its beginnings to the present.

4. Stanley, Search 75.

5. Stanley, Search 83.

6. In the revised preface to his work on the subject (1975), Stanley, for example, indicates that in his initial series of articles (1964-65) he was writing in response to extreme positions of an earlier time. He adds that although the problem of paganism is still with us, now that the predominantly Christian nature of Old English literature is emphasized, he must “protest the secularity” of some non-religious poems in the Old English corpus, including “Beowulf” (Search ix-x). In his more recent work, In the Foreground: Beowulf (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), Stanley reaffirms this position. While he indicates that his own leanings are Christianist on the meaning of wyrd (except in glosses) (206), he also suggests support for at least one secular, fatalistic reading of “Beowulf” 2526-27b (237-38, n. 43).


10. quoted in Stanley, Search 117.


12. The reader may note that I do not utilize the standard opposition of “pagan” versus “Christian” to describe the different cultural strands in Anglo-Saxon society. It seems an oversimplification of a much more complex situation. “Germanic” seems a better opposition to “Christian” in that “Germanic” represents a set of cultural beliefs and folk
traditions which, although certainly initially closely related to pagan (non-Christian) beliefs and practices, remained in the literature and culture of the Anglo-Saxons long after pagan practices were discontinued. These cultural strands, which can be viewed as opposites, blend with fascinating beauty in the native poetry of Anglo-Saxon England. Thus, the warrior saint Andreas acts neither as a militaristic pagan nor a passive Mediterranean Christian saint, but rather as a typically militaristic Germanic hero and Christian saint. It is very likely the Anglo-Saxons (particularly later in the period) did not see as many oppositions in their interwoven strands of cultural allusion as we do.

13. *Concordance*, s.vv. *wyrd*, *wyrd*, *wyrd*, *gewyrda*, *gewyrde*, *gewyrdes*, *gewyrdum*, *uurd*, *uuyrdae*. The Latin words are in the oblique case. Latin translations from Lewis and Short, s.vv. Lewis and Short comment that *fatum* is often synonymous with *fortuna*, *fors*, *sors*, and *casus* and that *fatum* is also synonymous with Greek *moira* (s.v. *fatum*).


15. “Fate must approach extremely near to the aged man, seek the treasure of his soul, divide asunder life from the body; not for long was the life of the prince wound in flesh then.”


17. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *gewef*, *Concordance*, s.vv., also s.v. *gewefe*.

18. The Northumbrian version of the riddle is called the “Leiden Riddle” after the


20. See, for example, "Beowulf" 552, 1443, 1548, and 2755.


22. Stanley, Search 94.


24. Williamson 267, 369-70.

25. See also Dictionary of Old English, Fascicle A, s.v. ametan.

26. Some have read wyrd as an accusative in this instance, which suggests the alternate reading that metod ordains the wyrd of each man. See Klaeber's citation of C. W. M. Grein, Beowulf 215, n. 2526. Elsewhere, Grein et al. suggest the opposite, that wyrd is substantive in these lines. See C. W. M. Grein and F. Holthausen, Sprachschatz der Angelsächsischen Dichter, new edition revised by J. J. Köhler (1861-64; Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1912) s.v. wyrd, wirt, wurd.


29. The phrase *sod metod* occurs ten other times in the Old English corpus, including five times in “Genesis” and “Exodus,” where such emphasis would make sense.

*Concordance*, s.v.v. *metod, meotod, meotud*.


31. Including two other references in “Beowulf” (1076, 1176), “Genesis” (1738), “Menelogium” (169), “Fortunes of Men” (17), and “Christ” (886). *Concordance*, s.v.v. *meotodsceaft, metodsceaft, metodsceafte, meotudgesceafte, meotudgesceafte*. Another related word, *meotudwange*, is also associated with death, the context indicating a “battlefield” is meant by “the measurer’s field.” “Andreas” 8.


35. Kluge 23, §41.
36. I would like to thank David McDougall of the Dictionary of Old English staff for his assistance in suggesting the possible grammatical origin of *metten*.


40. Owen-Crocker, Dress 98.


43. “Elene” 1046, “Beowulf” 2570, and “Meters of Boethius” 1.28. The subjects of the two other instances are God (“Andreas” 843) and the evil Egyptian pharaoh pursuing the Israelites (“Exodus” 136). Concordance, s.vv. gescraf, gescreaf.

44. “Notes” to “The Franks Casket,” 206.

45. Owen, Rites 34.


47. Enright 61-62.

48. Enright 63-64.

49. Enright 58-59. Enright indicates that a Byzantine brooch of the same age depicts Mary, mother of Jesus, with a spindle in her hand during a visit with an angel. The scene
was apparently not rare in Byzantine art. On this basis, some have suggested that the
Germanic bracteates are derivative. However, Enright finds little evidence to support the
connection, particularly given the differences of representation.
50. Enright 64.
51. Enright 65.
52. Enright 65. Enright’s claim is in keeping with the finds of weaving swords
mentioned in Chapter 1.
53. Enright 69.
54. Barber, Women’s Work 81, 83.
55. Barber, Women’s Work 243.
56. Smithers 68. Miranda Green also states that early sculpture discovered in the
Rhineland contains depictions of motherly divinities whose imagery is in “marked
contrast” to other Celtic and Celto-Germanic groups, including one altar on which two of
the three goddesses have what is possibly a work-box for textiles and a distaff,
respectively. Unfortunately, she does not list the century to which the finds date.
Miranda Green, Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers (1995; New York:
George Braziller, 1996) 108-109. Another find which has been identified as deriving
from the same Rhineland tradition was found in an early grave in Cambridgeshire (110).
57. J. D. A. Ogilvy indicates that the Anglo-Saxons knew the Heliand, and some
passages from it occur in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. See Books Known to the English,
597-1066, Mediaeval Academy of America Publication 76 (Cambridge, Mass.:
Mediaeval Academy of America, 1967) 144, 156.


61. Translation from Murphy 20.

62. See also 249.3633b.

63. Translation from Murphy 72.

64. Translation from Murphy 73.

65. Translation from Murphy 157.

66. Translation from Murphy 177-78.

67. Berr seems to suggest such a connection in the definition of both Old Saxon and Old English *metod* as both "God" and "fate" (s.v. *metod*). Serht also defines *metod* as "fate" (s.v. *metod*).


69. Larrington xi.
70. Larrington 6.20.1-2.

71. Bellows 9.20, n. 20. The last two are generally considered a later interpolation, perhaps arising from classical influence.


73. Kuhn 207.5.4.

74. Larrington 150.53.1.

75. Larrington 183.7.3, 236.13.1.

76. Larrington 242.30.4.

77. Larrington 159.13.1-4.

78. Larrington 152.2.3.

79. Larrington 63.13.3-4. In modern English, the term “life span” may derive from the same textile metaphor. “Span” is the participial form of *spinnan* and can mean “something spun” (Onions, Friedrichsen, and Burchfield, s.v. “spin”). On the other hand, life “span” may derive from a noun “span” which means the “distance from tip of thumb to extended tip of little finger” (s.v. “span”).

80. Larrington 114.2.1-2.

81. Kuhn 130.3.1.

82. Larrington 115.3.1, 3-4.


85. Hans Kuhn, ed., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten*

86. Larrington 192.1.3.
87. Kuhn 219.1.3.
88. Larrington xii.
89. Prose Edda 18.
90. Prose Edda 18.
91. Prose Edda 157.
93. Davidson and Fisher 192, 248. The Latin term is *fata* in both instances.
96. Although Saxo Grammaticus’ avowed intention is to describe a pagan Germanic religious experience, it is possible that his account may be influenced by classical texts.
97. Holder VI, 181.22.
98. Davidson and Fisher 169.
99. The Danes had a rather unique relationship with the Anglo-Saxons during much of the period as perpetual enemies, occupiers, and finally neighbors in England under the Danelaw (late ninth century onward). Some cross-cultural influence undoubtedly took place, although its effect on the religious beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons is difficult to assess.
100. Homer, *Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (1951; Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961). Lattimore’s Destiny is Fate in these instances.


102. “Easily recognized is the line of that man, for whom Kronos’ son weaves good fortune in his marrying and begetting” (*Odyssey* IV.207-208).


104. Zeus characteristically married goddesses whose powers he desired, such as Metis; in her case, he consumed her and thus had her powers within him.

105. E. J. W. Barber, *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994) 235; Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman and Kindred Evidence, also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1951) 416-17. Plato’s *Republic* includes a description of the roles of the Moirai which differs slightly from other accounts. He recounts a dream of a friend named Er in which Er travels with the dead to be reincarnated and observes the process of being fated to a new life. As they travel towards their allotment, the souls come to where they can see the center light of the
universe, within which is found the "spindle of Necessity" turning the universe within a
whorl of several concentric circles (374.616c-d). The spindle turns in the lap of Lady
Necessity (375.617b). There are three women "also sitting on thrones which were evenly
spaced around the spindle. They were the Fates, the daughters of Necessity . . . they were
Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos . . . with Lachesis singing of the past, Clotho of the
present, and Atropos of the future" (375.617c). Each soul is thrown a lot from Lachesis’
lap (375.618a), then receives its guardian deity from her and passes under Clotho’s hand
and the spindle "to ratify the destiny the soul had chosen" (378-79.620e). The soul is
then led "to Atropos and her spinning, to make the web woven by Clotho fixed and
unalterable" (379.620e). The textile process of Plato’s Moirai seems somewhat confused
(why a second spinning by Atropos after weaving?), but the Republic’s depiction of the
symbolic textile process involved in the exchange is vivid. Plato, Republic, translated by
Heinemann, 1952) III.379. Machon wrote in Alexandria between 300-260 B.C.
107. Edmonds III.449.
108. Edmonds III.483.
110. Concordance, s.v. gebyrd. The Dictionary of Old English defines gebyrd in this
sense, "what is allotted by or ordained from birth: fate, destiny" (Fascicle B, s.v. gebyrd
noun, sense B).
111. Onians 379.


113. Detienne and Vernant 137-38.

114. Ogilvy, *Books* 146-48. Ogilvy points out that the Celtic monastic orders who had so much influence on Anglo-Saxon monastic development had access to some Greek materials, as well, which may have been another point of access for the Anglo-Saxons.

115. Bischoff and Lapidge 2, 268. However, Lapidge indicates that the extent of the leaders' influence on Aldhelm is problematic because Aldhelm "spent a relatively short period of time (two years?) at Canterbury in the school of Theodore and Hadrian" (2).


117. Ogilvy, *Books* 146. Michael Lapidge suggests that the texts must have included Biblical and patristic materials, since a few Greek prayers and glosses of Greek words from Biblical sources are to be found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, and the influence of these materials on some early Anglo-Latin and Old English religious texts also seems profound (Bischoff and Lapidge 169-70, 241, 261).


and 252, §40. The mention of the Fates occurs as two mythic trees tell Alexander his fate, the first time in "Indian" (given in Latin) with the Fates called \textit{fata} (also glossed as \textit{wyrd}) (220 and 250, §37) and the second in Greek (given in Latin with the Greek names for the Fates, as previously cited). It is not at all certain that Alexander wrote the "Letter."

120. Barber, \textit{Women's} 236.

121. Scheid and Svensbro 105.

122. Latin epitaph quoted in Onians 350. The translation is mine.

123. quoted in Onians 351. The translation is mine.


125. Ovid, \textit{Tristia} 221.

126. Ovid, \textit{Tristia} 249.

127. Barber, \textit{Women's} 245.


130. Ogilvy, \textit{Books} 166.


132. The translation is mine.

133. Lapidge and Rosier 79. The full Latin text reads: "In saltu nascor ramosa fronde virescens, / Sed fortuna meum mutaverat ordine fatum, / Dum veho per collum teretem
vertigine molam: / Tam longa nullus zona praecingitur heros. / Per me fata virum dicunt decernere Parcas; / Ex quo conficitur regalis stragula pepli. / Frigora dura viros sternant, ni forte resistam” (Ewald 117, LVI.1-7).


137. Alfred’s Boethius Chapter 39.

138. Alfred’s Boethius 35.102.21.

139. Concordance, s.vv. wyrrde, uuyrda, gewyrda, gwyrrda. The other words which gloss parca, parcae or related forms include burgruna, burgrunae, burgrunan, burgrune, hægtesse, wicce, wiccyna, wiccena, wycena, wylfenne. Burh-runne or burh-runan is defined by Dictionary of Old English, Fascicle B as “glossing Parcae ‘the Fates,’ Furiae ‘The Furies’” (s.v.). Bosworth and Toller define hægtesse “witch, hag, fury” (s.v., also see Chapter 3 of this work), wicce “witch, sorceress” (s.v.), and wylfen “she-wolf” or a gloss of “Bellona” (s.v.).

140. Alfred’s Boethius 39.131.8-12.

141. quoted in Stanley, Search 110.

142. quoted in Stanley, Search 110.
144. quoted in Eleanor Hull, Folklore of the British Isles (1928; London: Methuen, 1977) 170.
145. quoted in Onians 357.
147. Green 42-43.
148. Green 72, 77.
149. Onians 352.
150. quoted in Onians 361.
151. Enright 67.
152. Barber, Women’s 243; Neumann 227.
153. In addition to contact with Christianized Gaul and Rome, the Anglo-Saxons had long-standing contact with other Germanic and Scandinavian tribes. Anglo-Saxon ecclesiasts served as missionaries to the Saxons, Frisians, and other continental Germanic peoples from early in the period (late seventh century to ninth century). International contacts occurred during Alfred’s time (ninth century), as well. Besides having contacts with Flanders and Germany, Athelstan also took Hakon, son of King Harold Fairhair of Norway, as a foster-son in the early tenth century (Owen-Crocker, Dress 14). As already mentioned, the Danes also had continuous contact with the Anglo-Saxons, and not all of it violent, including the cross-cultural contact which must have taken place during the
Danelaw (from the late ninth century onward). The saga of Gunnlaug Wormtongue (an
Icelander) shows him visiting Ethelred in late Anglo-Saxon England (late tenth, early
eleventh century) and reciting Norse poetry, which wins him a place of honor at the
king’s court (Jones 188-89). Not long after, Cnut, a Dane, and his descendants became
the rulers of choice among the Anglo-Saxons (early eleventh century). Obviously, points
of contact existed which allowed the Anglo-Saxons access to the cultures of fellow
Germanic peoples. The oral and possibly textual traditions shared in this way are
impossible to document, but should not be entirely discounted.

156. quoted in Frantzen, *Desire* 86.
157. Frantzen, *Desire* 86.
158. Frantzen, *Desire* 86.
159. Frantzen, *Desire* 87.
162. Frantzen, *Desire* 88.
110-111.
Chapter 5: Word-Weaving and Other Metaphors

WORD-WEAVING

The textile metaphor has so far involved actions chiefly associated with women and the cosmos. Another image, the subject of this chapter, is that of the word-weaver, the poet. In “Elene,” the poet-narrator, Cynewulf, says that despite his aged mind and body, he “wordcraeftum wæf ond wundrum læs, / þragum þreodude ond geþanc reodode / nihtes nearwe” (“wove with word-skills and selected marvels, deliberated at times and searched out ideas carefully through the night”) (1237-39a). Cynewulf then elaborates on the nature and source of his inspiration, a glorious gift: “gife unscynde / mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd begeat, / torht ontynde, tidum gerymde, / bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand, / leoðucraeft onleac” (“the Mighty King bestowed a glorious gift and anointed the intellect, revealed a brightness, prolonged the hours, unbound bodily frame, unwound the mind, unlocked poetic skill”) (1246b-1250a). The lines suggest the poet’s interest in the craft of poetry, a craft which he performs by “weaving” words. The section discussing the poetic process of “word-weaving” is set off from the rest of the text of “Elene” by its rhyming half-lines. Some pairings are less than perfect rhymes, such as “wæflæs” (1237) and “onlag/had” (1245), but the skillfully worked poetics of the section describing Cynewulf’s word-weaving may be his attempt to demonstrate his best poetic skill in gratitude to his ultimate sponsor, the Lord.

A passage in “Beowulf” describing the creation of poetry may contain a similar image. After Beowulf has slain Grendel, a huge celebration is held in Heorot. As part of that celebration, “Hwilum cyninges þegn, / guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig, / se ðe
ealfela ealdgesegena / worn gemunde, word oþer fand / soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan / sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian, / ond on sped wrecan spel gerade, / wordum wrixlan”

("Sometimes a thane of the king, an exultant warrior mindful of poems/songs, one who remembered a great many of the ancient traditions, arranged other words properly bound; the man then began wisely to rehearse Beowulf’s undertaking, and fluently to tell the adapted story, to vary words") (867b-874a). In defining the phrase “soðe gebunden,” the Dictionary of Old English indicates that it is figurative, “either ‘bound in truth’ or perhaps, as has been suggested, ‘correctly joined by the device of alliteration’ (attested in lME; cf. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 35: with lel letteres loken).”¹ The variation of words, “wordum wrixlan” also suggests the common Old English poetic technique of semantic variation. While “soðe gebunden” may or may not be textile imagery, the image of binding disparate elements into a poetic whole seems similar to the weaving of words described in “Elene.”

Why might a connection have been made within Anglo-Saxon culture between poetry and weaving? One answer involves the probable place of weaving at the center of the Anglo-Saxon household. In an unrelated context, Allen Frantzen states, “The importance for narrative theory of these looms--sites for story-telling and fabric-making--in the middle of these huts, not apart from the domestic dwelling in weaving sheds, awaits attention; Anglo-Saxon looms deserve the scrutiny so far lavished only on harps.”² Frantzen alludes to the dwelling huts found in Sutton Courtenay which contained loom post holes in the center, indicating that domestic life in the small huts centered around the loom. The loom’s placement would be entirely logical, considering that each female head
of household would need to weave daily to provide for her household, and by placing the loom in the center of the household, she could work while keeping an eye on children or food preparation.

As Frantzen notes, the loom would probably also be a central site for entertainment, whether the weaver entertained children or was herself entertained by other household members with stories and songs. The number of loom weight finds supports the notion that a loom would be present in nearly every household. On larger estates, workers in the textile outbuildings would also be likely to require entertainment in what can be tedious tasks of repetitive, everyday spinning and weaving. Some evidence suggests that such entertainment took place in Anglo-Saxon textile areas. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the embroideresses in the noble household of Æthelwynn were entertained by Dunstan and his harp during rest periods. If Dunstan were singing words to his music, the lyrics would likely be poetic.

Caedmon’s story also suggests that Old English poetry could be accompanied by the harp. However, whether “Genesis” or “Beowulf” was recited in noble textile workshops and average households or not, it is very likely that in the average household, spinning and weaving songs, which have existed from time immemorial in every textile culture, were sung. Even today, we sing: “All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel, the monkey thought it all in fun, POP goes the weasel.” The song is originally a spinning song, with the POP indicating that the yarn-winder is full. The song of the valkyries in Chapter 3 is another instance of a weaving song (with the typically repetitive rhythm and wording associated with textile songs), although it is more poetic in
nature. Poetry of lesser or greater form may have been sung or recited as entertainment and education over the spindles, distaffs, looms, and needles of Anglo-Saxon England. This would certainly render a connection between weaving and poetry attractive to the minds of men, once children in one or another of these kinds of homes.\(^4\)

Another suggestion which links lyre and loom is the physical and aural similarities of the two, a connection made in several textile cultures across the ages. Hoffmann mentions reconstructions of Egyptian ground looms which have recreated the humming affects associated with them in ancient poetry.\(^5\) Erika von Erhardt-Siebold gives further explanation of classical allusions to the musical loom:

> the swiftly travelling shuttle will, in striking the taut warp-threads, cause them to vibrate and produce low notes, a sort of irregular humming or buzzing. The ancient writers, especially the poets, at times speak of the sounding or singing of the shuttle or warp-threads . . . “Singing,” no doubt, is a poetical phrase and metaphor; we know that because of their similarity loom and lyre were closely associated in the minds of the ancients.\(^6\)

Riddle #35 suggests that the Anglo-Saxons might have made the same connection. Lines 6-7 in particular describe the sound of the shuttle in the loom, “ne þurh þreata geþræcu þræd me ne hlimmeð, / ne æt me hrutende hrísil scriþeð” (“nor does thread resound in me through the pressure of many, nor does the humming shuttle glide through me”). The thread in line six undoubtedly refers to the taut warp threads. The “pressure of many” which makes the thread sing may refer to the tension created by loom weights, a tension which would cause a shuttle to resound in the shed, or it may refer to the number of rods
and posts, particularly shed rods, which would also be responsible for the tension.\textsuperscript{7}

Erika von Erhardt-Siebold points out that in the Northumbrian version of the riddle (the “Leiden” riddle), line 7 reads: “ne me hrutendu hrisil scelfath” (“nor does the humming shuttle make me tremble”). This “can only refer to a wavy motion in the rows of warp-threads or to their acoustic vibrations, both produced by the shuttle.”\textsuperscript{8} The musicality of both lines in their different versions seems onomatopoeic in a suggestion of the music created within the loom. Riddle #70 may also allude to a musical tool, a marvellous creature which “Singeð þurh sidan” (“sings through sides”) (2a). The detail, among several others, is part of what led von Erhardt-Siebold to deduce the tool in question as a shuttle. She states, “This is what a shuttle does; for it produces sounds through the lateral warp-threads.”\textsuperscript{9} Both riddles recreate the musicality associated with the loom, building another metaphorical bridge from textile production to music through visual and aural links. The link between poetry and textiles, if derived from a connection of lyre and loom, would obviously assume a relationship between music and poetry. If the connection did indeed exist, then the poets in question would have had ample opportunity to witness the connection in domestic surroundings.

John Leyerle suggests another reason why textile production might have been connected to poetics, or, rather, why textile production is equated to poetics: the complex patterning of Old English poetry. In his article, “The Interlace Structure of Beowulf,” Leyerle argues that “Beowulf” in particular reveals an interlace (interwoven) pattern of themes. “Beowulf” does not “present a linear structure,” but, as Leyerle indicates, its structure is a “poetic analogue of the interlace designs common in Anglo-Saxon art of the
seventh and eighth centuries." He connects the interlace art to textiles: "Designs over an entire folio are called carpet pages after their resemblance to woven tapestries." Interlace decoration resembles "intricate weaving." Leyerle also states, "At a structural level, literary interlace has a counterpart in tapestries where positional patterning of threads established the shape and design of the fabric, whether the medium is thread in textile or words in a text." In explaining interlace and its relation to textual examples, he suggests interlace is "a concept difficult to explain or grasp without such a visual analogue." This visual analogue would have been available for the Anglo-Saxons in weaving and may be the source of the metaphor of "word-weaving."

Within the text of "Beowulf," thematic interlace occurs as past actions (commonly known as episodes) are intertwined with actions of the narrative present. Another kind of interlace occurs as two or more strands of variation are interwoven, which Hrothgar's thane's passage on poetics supports (867b-874a). Examples of thematic interlace within "Beowulf" include the episodes referring to Hygelac's Frisian expedition (1202-14, 2354-68, 2501-9, 2913-21). The first allusion occurs as the Danes give the magnificent necklace of the Brosings to Beowulf; the text refers immediately to its loss when Hygelac is killed in the raid on the Frisians. Thus, the treasure is linked to disaster, perhaps a foreshadowing of Beowulf's experience with the dragon hoard. The second reference occurs as Beowulf prepares to meet the dragon. The episode parallels the two rash actions which result in the death of a king. The third allusion takes place in the same context as Beowulf recalls how he took revenge on Hygelac's killer at the Frisian raid without a sword, and how he will always act the same, whether he is alone or not, until
his sword fails him. This is thoroughly prophetic of the upcoming scene with the dragon, in which Beowulf chooses to fight alone and trust in himself and his sword. The last allusion comes after Beowulf’s death, as mourners recall the feud begun by Hygelac’s raid and worry about the destruction awaiting them as a result. As Hygelac’s rash choice caused the destruction of his fighting troop, so now it may extend destruction to all the Geats. The narrative thread of Hygelac’s episodes weaves through the entire text, foreshadowing Beowulf’s final doom. The parallel between the main narrative thread and the episodic thread is striking: a treasure, a rash action which results in the death of a king, swords failing and Beowulf standing alone, and resulting destruction all neatly parallel the end of Beowulf’s reign.\(^{17}\)

Other narrative threads include the monsters vanquished in underwater fights as well as the episodes such as Hildeburh’s which describe or allude to feuds and destroyed peacewoven bonds. Leyerle summarizes, “The themes make a complex, tightly-knotted lacertine interlace that cannot be untied without losing the design and form of the whole. The tension and force of the poem arise from the way the themes cross and juxtapose.”\(^{18}\)

This is reminiscent of the tension necessary to keep the shape of the fabric intact within the warp and weft (also possibly linked to poetry through music). He points out, “There are no digressions in *Beowulf* because of the “interwoven coherence of the episodes.”\(^{19}\)

Leyerle further notes important allusions to the concept of literary “interlace” in Anglo-Saxon England in addition to Cynewulf’s allusion to “word-weaving” in “Elene”:

Stylistic interlace is a characteristic of Aldhelm and especially of Alcuin.

They weave direct statement and classical tags together to produce verbal
braids in which allusive literary references from the past cross and recross with the present subject. The device is self-conscious and the poets describe the technique with the phrases *fingere seria* or *textere seria*, 'to fashion or weave intertwinings.' . . . In basic meaning, then, a poetic text is a weaving of words to form, in effect, a verbal carpet page.\(^\text{20}\)

The Latinate connection between "textile" and "text" may have encouraged the same connection in Old English, a possibility to which I will return. A connection within Anglo-Saxon culture between woven cloth and interlace in art and literature would be understandable. The extremely common visual analogue of weaving, as mentioned in Chapter 3, was probably an attractive motif in a world of harsh nature and war because of its imposition of order on nature. Either the textile or the graphic art might have in turn spawned a metaphor linking that imposition of intricate, interlacing order with the complex interlacing found in Old English poetic texts.\(^\text{21}\) Both the complex weaves and embroidery described in this study leave little doubt that Anglo-Saxon textile art contained the highly complex, interlacing threads and weaves which might have inspired such images.

James C. Addison illustrates another type of interlace which he relates to Leyerle's interlace: aural interlace or interlacing sounds and metrics within a poem.\(^\text{22}\)

For example, in the first section of the "Battle of Brunanburh," lines one, three, and seven "exhibit the interlace of theme, semantics, and sound"\(^\text{23}\): "Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten" (1), "Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir" (3), and "afaran Eadweardes; swa him geæpele wæs" (7).\(^\text{24}\) The focus on the men's names as the alliterative determinant for
each line is probably not a coincidence; the poem links the names of two royal sons and their father, the heroes of the poem. Lines one and three also place each brother in his relationship to the other through parallel syntax: Athelstan, the king and Eadmund, the prince. The second half of each of these lines also seems linked by alliteration, *eorla dryhten* and *ealdorlagne tir*. This interlaced alliteration beyond a single line and a single sound is reminiscent of Cynewulf’s word-weaving section in “Elene.”

Addison also points out the close semantic relationships, among other words, of *Æpelstan, æpeling, and geæpele*. All three words are connected by the underlying meaning “noble.” Semantic interlace, in particular, aids the poet in emphasizing important messages of the poem, such as the nobility of the heroic royalty being praised. Addison states further that such complex interlacing on several levels is not unusual: rather, it is “typical” of this poem and others.²⁵ He analyzes a second section of lines: “Sceotta leoda and scipflotan” (11), “secga swate, siðpan sunne up” (13), “sah to setle. Ær læg secg mænig” (17), and “ofe scild scoten, swilce Scittisc eac” (19). The interlinear, interlaced alliteration of *sc* and *s* words is obvious. *Sceotta* and *Scittisc* set this section of the poem off in an alliterative envelope of sorts, words “similar in both etymology and sound.”²⁶ The intricate relationships of lines based on number, internal and external vocalic and consonantall alliteration, semantics, and theme demonstrate the interlaced nature of the poetic craft in the “Battle of Brunanburh.”²⁷

Addison asserts that the complex interlace found in the “Battle of Brunanburh” is not unique; rather, the “phenomenon is so widespread as to warrant full-length study.”²⁸ He also indicates that some aural interlace extends from connecting a few lines to
recurring strands across entire poems. Why has so much interlace structure been missed in the study and analysis of Old English poetry? Addison suggests that the respect accorded the poetic line as a unit in the past few centuries has blinded scholars to the possibility of interlinear interlace: "Can we not conceive that the poet, who has sustained a complex and intricate thematic and tonal structure over hundreds of lines, can also sustain alliterative, aural structure over more than one or two lines?" Moreover, the "recurrent aural, alliterative signals would have doubtless facilitated both retention and comprehension" for both the poet and readers or listeners.

The high occurrence of interlace structures is not likely an accident, but rather the "conscious artistry of the poet." The poet's artistry consists of both forming the strands and connecting them: "from all of these related strands--alliterative, thematic, syntactic, and semantic--structure derives. Out of the complex, intricate web of linear correspondences and plurilinear connections, an overall continuity comes. Structure and continuity, then, often working on many levels simultaneously, are carried by the underlying design of aural interlace." Pauline E. Head states, moreover, that recurrent images in Old English poetry such as the beasts of battle or "hero on the beach" indicate a sense of continuity between poems: they "would have reflected and renewed depictions of carnage in stories previously told, binding the new to the old and drawing the past into the present. The poet's recollection and repetition of the theme would have signified continuity and the cyclic movement of time." This continuity suggests interlacing between different texts within the Old English corpus, such as "Judith" and "Beowulf."
Analogues beyond Anglo-Saxon England which may comment on the relationship of Old English and Anglo-Latin word-weaving to related images in other cultures include Greek and Roman references to word-weaving, some of which the Anglo-Saxons might have known. The Greeks, in particular, explored weaving as poetry, such as the poet Bacchylides, who "weaves a hymn."35 Bacchylides and other choral poets including Pindar repeatedly use weaving as a metaphor for their lyric poetic songs.36 Weaving of words also occurs in the works of Homer, but rather than referring to poetic weaving, Homer describes the crafty weaving of political speeches by Odysseus and his companions.37 However, the Anglo-Saxons, as mentioned in Chapter 4, do not seem to have had extensive exposure to Greek poetry, except perhaps Homer through the medium of later commentators.

The Romans made connections between weaving and writing, most clearly in the metaphor embodied within textere/textus, which initially referred only to weaving, but which was extended to mean writing. Such extension of meaning is attested in Cicero's prose letters (106-43 BC). This meaning eventually became so commonplace that we ourselves forget that our "text" actually means a "web."38 Some Roman poets also refer to "word-weaving," such as the pseudo-Virgilian poet of Ciris, who emphasizes repeatedly his desire to "weave" a poem for his patron.39 "Word-weaving" as a metaphor for poetics occurs in texts as late as the book of epigrams of Luxurius (c. 520-530 AD), written in Carthage under the rulership of the Vandals.40

Several of the works of classical writers such as Cicero, as mentioned in Chapter 4, were available to the Anglo-Saxons, which suggests the likelihood of classical
influence on the Old English metaphor of word-weaving.\textsuperscript{41} Although contemporary source critics might rush to accept this possibility as the full explanation of the existence of “word-weaving” in Old English, there are other factors to be considered, nonetheless. In discussing the etymology of “text,” Scheid and Svenbro comment that the history of the word “could quickly grow to immense proportions given that other Indo-European languages besides Greek and Latin used similar ones.”\textsuperscript{42} The metaphor is attested in Irish and Vedic sources, as well as classical.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, the “Beowulf” passage indicates that the poetry associated with word-weaving may also belong to the native traditions of the Germanic peoples, who may have developed the metaphoric connection independently as textile-producing cultures or as the common heritage of an Indo-European culture.

The \textit{Poetic Edda}, for example, describes oral eloquence, “Speech-runes you must know if you want no one to repay sorrow with enmity; wind them about, weave them about, set them all together at that meeting where people must go to fully constituted courts.”\textsuperscript{44} This metaphor is probably not due to Latin influence. On the other hand, the \textit{Gesta Danorum} of Saxo Grammaticus, written between 1208 and 1218, may be a Latin or Germanic analogue for Old English word-weaving, or perhaps both. For example, when Balder attempts to wed Nanna, although Balder (the Norse god) argues his suit, Nanna is so clever that she “wove arguments for declining Balder’s proposal and so dodged his entreaties.”\textsuperscript{45} Amleth, king of the Danes (source of Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}) delivers a similarly eloquent speech to his people to assuage their anger over his murder of his uncle/step-father and a castle full of nobles, listing his motives for revenge until he no longer wishes to “weave my miseries anew.”\textsuperscript{46} Later in the Danes’ history, upon
believing no royal heir remains to claim the throne, they award it to Hiarni, "a bard expert in Danish poetry," upon which the narrator comments, "So an epitaph was reimbursed with a kingdom and the weight of an empire granted for the weaving together of a few letters." After the rightful heir, Fridlef, returns and later seeks a bride, he finds himself in the path of a giant, whom Fridlef defeats and despoils of a great treasure, "and in a lively voice wove this song," replete with victorious poetic lyrics.

The *Gesta Danorum* may link word-weaving to Latin or Danish sources (or both). Since Saxo Grammaticus composed the history in Latin, and he probably received an education which included Plato’s *Timaeus* and the works of Virgil, Cicero, and other Latin writers, he may have adopted the word-weaving metaphor from them. On the other hand, the author of the *Gesta Danorum* insists that his history is Danish, and his attitude towards his people’s history attests his pride in that association. Much of his source material in the *Gesta Danorum* is native in origin, and the values of the heroic code common to Norse, Old English, and other Germanic works are manifest in the stories which Saxo Grammaticus includes in his narrative. As Hilda Ellis Davidson states, Saxo displays a "wide knowledge and enjoyment of northern literature and of the oral culture of his time." Moreover, all four instances of word-weaving refer to a gift for oral eloquence, the last two clearly referring to an oral poetic eloquence which is characteristic of the oral-formulaic poetry of the Germanic peoples. Hiarni himself is identified as an expert in Danish poetry. It may be a significant coincidence that in "Beowulf" the same kind of oral poetic eloquence of its Danish poet is also described in what seem to be textile terms. In spite of its late date, the word- and song-weaving of the
Gesta Danorum may reflect a Germanic poetic textile tradition of which Cynewulf and the "Beowulf" poet may also be a part.

Fortunately, a reductive solution is not necessary; classical and Germanic word-weaving do not rule one another out. Influence from either, both, or neither could have produced the Old English metaphor of word-weaving. Cynewulf's word-weaving illustrates the multiplicity of possible influences. Since the word-weaving of "Elene" is found as written text, it may be related to Latin textere/textus; at the same time, the word-weaving of "Elene" appears to describe the tradition of oral-formulaic poetry, which suggests a possible relationship to oral Germanic word-weaving. Word-weaving also exists in cultures completely disassociated from the Indo-European pool, which in turn suggests independent or convergent traditions of word-weaving are as common as textile cultures. The Anglo-Saxons, as has been argued, had plentiful reasons for finding textile production a resonant metaphor for the creation of poetry, whatever its "origin."

Leyerle indicates that interlace poetics were known in the late Middle Ages, as well: "Robert Manning states in his Chronicle (1338) that he writes in a clear and simple style so that he will be readily understood; others, he says, use quante Inglis in complicated schemes of ryme couwee or strangere or enterlace." What makes this statement of particular interest for Anglo-Saxonists is that it takes place at the time of the Alliterative Revival of the fourteenth century, "a sudden emergence of a body of poems in the alliterative meter of Old English verse. Actually the alliterative tradition must have continued almost without interruption, but only a handful of alliterative poems survives." These survivals include Layamon's Brut (c.1205), the alliterative Morte
d’Arthur, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

As noted previously, Sir Gawain also contains a phrase by which it clearly links itself to an alliterative tradition; in describing his or her poetic intentions, the poet indicates that he or she will tell the tale “With lel letteres loken,” “A reference to alliteration.” Could this poetry, connected to the interlace traditions of poetry of Anglo-Saxon times, be the enterlace mentioned? Another interesting parallel between Manning’s statement and the Alliterative Revival is that the movement seems to have taken place in a provincial center, and the poetics used would have seemed to Londoners “barbaric” or at least outdated, perhaps quante Inglis? The works of the Alliterative Revival were not identical to Old English poetry by any means, since the rules for alliterative meter were changed to some degree, particularly in practice. The differences in language and style are also significant. But Manning could be pointing to a tradition which considered itself heir to Old English word-weaving, perhaps adopting a term related to Old English poetic style.

Other possibilities include classical influence. The Greek and Roman sources already mentioned could have influenced the poets of the Alliterative Revival as they did Chaucer, a contemporary of another school. French troubadours from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century also used a term, entrebescar los motz, which can be translated as “word-weaving.” Marianne Shapiro suggests that some controversy surrounded the use of “word-weaving,” which was equated, as in Old English, with the poetic use of language. On the one hand, word-weaving “could become a means of the loftiest expression so long as God had opened the mouth of the singer and given him the
On the other hand, many of the troubadours criticized "word-weaving" for its apparent ambiguity in conflating good and evil, its practitioners' virtual idol worship of poetic form, and its irregular argument full of interruptions. The term "occurs in concert with terms denoting subtlety, cunning, refinement, winnowing of meaning, ambiguity, and confusion."

The techniques used in word-weaving among the troubadours include complex rhyme, repetitive paranomasia, word-play, ambiguity, and the reconciliation of opposites. Repetitive paranomasia occurs in the Old English aural interlace analyzed by Addison, and the irregular, non-linear form of argument reminds one of "Beowulf." A more extended comparison of the troubadour poetics of "word-weaving" with Old and Middle English word-weaving would be useful in examining potential overlap (possibly reciprocal) between the cultures. Eleanor of Aquitaine's patronage of troubadour poets and her presence in England during her marriage to Henry II (1152-1204) suggest interchange could have been possible. However, the occurrence of word-weaving in both cultures, both textile cultures, may also be independent or derive from a similar source while developing independently or concurrently.

Eugène Vinaver also notes the development of what he designates an "interlace" style within French Arthurian romances which may be related to the Alliterative Revival and the troubadours. He notes the negative reaction of current scholars to a thirteenth century incorporation of most of the Arthurian legends in a romance called the "Vulgate Cycle" because of the work's non-linear development (a reaction quite similar to complaints heard about "Beowulf"). Vinaver suggests that scholars accustomed to the
linear plot development popular in the post-medieval world have failed to recognize that the narrative in question has interlace development. He states: "no single stretch of the narrative within the Cycle was self-contained; earlier or later adventures were constantly implied in any given section of the work." He names the device of "interweaving two or more separate themes" the "practice of interlacing" combined with "the process of digression." Vinaver suggests a connection to classical *amplificatio*, but argues that the romance interlace and digression techniques are utilized on a more "vast scale." An interesting correlation to Leyerle's work is that Vinaver also views the interlace style of decorative art (which he cites as appearing in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries) as an analogue, although he is reticent about taking the analogue as a point of common origin.

The French legends were certainly available to the writers of the fourteenth-century Alliterative Revival, given the subject matter undertaken by the latter. If the interlaced thematic structure popular in the French legends were known as *enterlace* (in some way connected to troubadour "word-weaving"?) perhaps this would explain the English use of the word. Anglo-Saxon styles in metal and stone work, textiles, and particularly manuscript illumination are known to have influenced the continental Normans after the Conquest, so perhaps the influence, if indeed the analogue of art is the source of the literary technique, would go the other way. Or, perhaps each of the movements shares techniques of rhetorical interlace without having any interrelationship at all. If nothing else, the existence of *enterlace* poetics as well as the word-weaving of earlier Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Greek and Latin texts indicates the attractive nature of
textile production as a resonant metaphor for poetics among a wide variety of peoples.

**SPIDER WEAVING**

In a great variety of cultures, the spider is connected to the spinning and weaving of textiles. This connection seems to have existed in Anglo-Saxon culture, as well. The clearest example occurs in Vercelli Homily 15 as the homilist describes the unrighteousness prevailing at the time of the Anti-Christ: “‘þa weofudu beoð to þan swiðe forlætene, þæt ða attorcoppan habbað innan awefene’ (“the altars will then be too much neglected, that the spiders have woven within”).67 A key philosophical question in identifying this example as metaphorical textile production is whether we or the Anglo-Saxons consider a spider’s “weaving” to be metaphorical at all. The anthropomorphic identification of the creation of spiders’ webs with weaving is at the core a textile metaphor, but there is the possibility that it was understood literally over time. Do we mentally compare the “gangewifran nett” (“spider’s web”)68 with textile production when we use the expression? Did they?

Some of the Old English names for spiders have also been considered evidence of a metaphorical connection between spiders and textile production. Bosworth and Toller explain the etymology of terms “gangel-wæfre,” “gage-wifre,” and “wæfer-gange” (all “spider”) as “a ganging weaver.”69 While the visual similarity between “wæfre”/”wifre” and Old English terms for weaving such as “wefan” is obvious, “wæfre” can also mean “waving” or “nimble.”70 Thus, the “going-weaver” might also be the “nimble-goer.” Whichever etymology is correct, one might wonder if a folk etymology for “gage-wifre” as “going weaver” occurred to the Anglo-Saxons as it does for us, even if the word did
not initially derive from a textile metaphor. The source of the modern word "spider," however, is definitely associated with textile production. It is derived from *spinnan, although the derivative *spidre is only attested in Old English in the compound spiderwiht (manuscript spiderwiht with n altered from some other letter).\textsuperscript{71} The word form *spithre is attested in Middle English.\textsuperscript{72}

The initial metaphorical connection between human and spider spinning and weaving is easily understood. Although spiders do not sit at a loom, their webs are sufficient wonders of overlaid, silk-like thread that their webs and human webs might seem very similar.\textsuperscript{73} There is no question that textile production was associated with spiders in Anglo-Saxon culture at some point.

\textit{Variegated Virtues}

Another textile metaphor which is found in Aldhelm has not yet been discussed within this work for two reasons: language (Latin) and subject matter (metaphors involving embroidery). The metaphor occurs in one of Aldhelm’s Latin works, and as mentioned previously, this work is intended mainly to address textile imagery in the Old English corpus, with reference to Latin (in particular, Anglo-Latin) works only as they elucidate issues addressed. Aldhelm’s example of an Anglo-Saxon’s metaphor of embroidery falls under the latter category as an image valuable in its relationship to the embroidered textiles described in Chapter 2. In the seventh-century \textit{De Virginitate}, Aldhelm instructs abbess Hildelith and the nuns of the community at Barking, Essex in their duty. This instruction includes praise for virginity, in particular, but Aldhelm cautions the women that true virtue does not come from simply remaining chaste. It is
also essential to develop other virtues. By way of example, he uses the metaphor of mixing colors in embroidery:

\[
\text{siquidem curtinarum sive stragularum textura, nisi panuculae purpureis,}
\]
\[
immo diversis colorum varietatibus fucatae inter densa filorum stamina}
\]
\[
ultra citroque decurrant et arte plumaria omne textrinum opus diversis}
\]
\[
imaginum thoracibus peroment, sed uniformi coloris fuco singillatim}
\]
\[
confecta fuerit, liquet profecto quoniam nec oculorum obtutibus iocunda}
\]
\[
nec ornamentorum pulcherrimae venustati formosa videbitur. Nam et}
\]
\[
curtinae veteris delubri non simplici et singulari tincturae genere}
\]
\[
splenduisse leguntur, sed ex auro, iacintho, purpura, bis tincto coco sive}
\]
\[
vermiculo cum bisso retorto dispari murice fulsisse describuntur.}^{74}
\]

Aldhelm’s description of the hangings may be the earliest allusion to Anglo-Saxon hangings which were embroidered. The varied colors of thread running through the “thick cloth-fibres” themselves suggest the use of multicolored threads within the actual weave, as well. Most of the surviving textiles from the Anglo-Saxon period are embroideries on base fabrics, which may be dyed, but which do not seem to contain variegated patterns within the actual weave. However, from written references, it seems certain that such interwoven variegation took place; Aldhelm’s reference offers further evidence. The embroidery depicted by Aldhelm, moreover, shares features of both the church vestments which remain from Anglo-Saxon England and the Bayeux Tapestry. For example, the “varying outlines of pictures” of a good embroidery sound very similar to the stitching on the Biblical figures of St. Cuthbert’s stole and maniple. The bodies,
faces, and articles of clothing of each figure are distinguished and given depth and texture by the variation of color in the threads chosen which demarcate them. The result is beautiful. The "outlines" within the Bayeux Tapestry also tend to lend the appearance of depth and texture by placement and variation of color. The bright tints Aldhelm mentions are common to all of the embroideries, and though somewhat faded in the older embroideries, the colors in the Bayeux Tapestry are still as vivid and varied as Aldhelm's description. The Anglo-Saxons had a taste for rich dyes and materials in their embroideries, as archaeology attests.

Aldhelm's use of textile imagery within *De Virginitate* reflects his understanding of the women in his audience. Textile work was indubitably part of their daily life, and they were probably familiar with the beautiful embroidery on vestments such as St. Cuthbert's, embroidery associated with the religious houses throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. In choosing metaphors which would resonate for them, Aldhelm creates a memorable association between their spiritual labors and their physical ones. It is this resonance of textiles in daily life which we lack that generally renders our appreciation of their metaphors less complete.

Notes

Chapter 5


3. The word in Old English for poem, *gieđd* also means song.

4. In her discussion of the loom imagery used by Aldhelm in his riddle *De Lorica*, Gale Owen-Crocker comments that "it is interesting to find a male scholar so familiar with the intricacies of the woman's craft of weaving" (*Dress* 176). Such familiarity is most likely to have been gained within a domestic setting.


6. von Erhardt-Siebold 11. In Greek literature, in particular, the "singing shuttle" is a common expression (*Scheid and Svenbro* 139).


9. von Erhardt-Siebold 16. Williamson and other scholars, as previously noted, solve the riddle with another musical object, the harp or the lyre. The potential conflation of the descriptions of a singing shuttle in the loom and a harp or lyre reiterates the visual and aural similarities between the images.


11. Leyerle 3.

12. Leyerle 3.

13. Leyerle 5.


15. The word "variation" in this context indicates multiple statements of aspects of the subject (Leyerle 4), a poetic strategy typical of Old English literature.
While I consider it highly likely that textile art initially inspired interlace themes in sculpture and manuscript illumination, interlace design in non-textile contexts clearly evolved as an art form in its own right in ways unlike the initial medium. The techniques necessary to produce some interlace designs such as serpentine lettering seem to differ markedly from techniques used to produce weave patterns or different types of embroidery, although serpentines might appear as decoration in embroideries.


23. Addison 268.


25. Addison 270.

26. Addison 270.

27. For full analysis, see Addison 269-71.

28. Addison 267.

29. Addison 268.

30. Addison 268.

31. Addison 269.
32. Addison 274.

33. Addison 275.


35. quoted in Scheid and Svenbro 21.

36. Scheid and Svenbro 117, 119. Pindar, known for particularly complex poetics which include the use of alliteration, rhythm, riddles, and kennings (I.28-29), describes his poetic efforts, “I weave for spearmen / my varied hymn” (I.113.86-87).

37. Scheid and Svenbro 113.

38. Scheid and Svenbro 106, 142-44.

39. Scheid and Svenbro 140.

40. Scheid and Svenbro 151.

41. Ogilvy indicates that some of Cicero’s *Epistolae* can be found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (*Books* 112).

42. Scheid and Svenbro 111. They also point out that the etymology occurs in non-Indo-European languages, as well (see 204-205, n. 1).


44. Larrington 168.12.1-6.

45. Davidson and Fisher 72. The Latin reads, “Hac responsi cauillacione elusis Balderi precibus, detrectandi coniugii prudens argumenta texebat” (Holder III, 73.15-16).


54. Abrams 231.


56. Shapiro 357.

57. Shapiro 357, 359, 362.

58. Shapiro 359.

59. Shapiro 358-60, 364.

62. Vinaver 10, 12.
63. Vinaver 10-11.
64. Vinaver 14-15.
65. Wormald 30.
66. Although probably unrelated, fourteenth-century Slavic hagiography also contains an interesting parallel to Anglo-Saxon word-weaving; a highly ornate style which incorporated "not just an interlacing and piling up of rhetorical devices but ... also a weaving of themes and subthemes" and which is known for its "repetition and lexical 'wrapping'" was known as "word-weaving." Maurice LaBauve Hébert, "Hesychasm, Word-weaving, and Slavic Hagiography: The Literary School of Patriarch Euthymius," diss., Brown U, 1992, DAI 53 (1993): 3934A. Perhaps weaving, for all of the reasons mentioned, has been an attractive analogy for literary creation in so many cultures as a common visual analogue lost to many in the contemporary world.
69. Bosworth and Toller I.361, 1151.
70. Bosworth and Toller I.1151.

73. In Greek literature, Democritus claims spiders taught humans to weave, while Roman Ovid narrates Arachne’s transformation from human weaver to spider; while the original weaver differs, spider-weaving and human weaving are nonetheless perceived as related (Scheid and Svenbro 128, 131).

74. Latin text from Ehwald 244, ll. 12-20. Translation from Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979) 71-72, as follows: “indeed, (in the case of) the weaving of hangings or carpets, if threads dyed with purple and indeed with diverse varieties of colours do not run here and there among the thick cloth-fibres and according to the embroiderer’s art ornament the woven fabric with the varying outlines of pictures, but it is made uniformly with a monochrome dye, it is immediately obvious that it will not appear pleasing to the glances of the eye nor beautiful against the most exquisite elegance of ornaments. For the curtains of the ancient temple are not read to have glowed with one simple and single kind of dye, but are described as having blazed with gold, blue, purple, twice-dyed scarlet or vermilion with twisted cotton of diverse tints.”
Conclusion

The material and argument of this thesis have been devoted to accomplishing two endeavors. The first has been to reconstruct the material culture of Anglo-Saxon textile production, to describe the tools, fibers, and techniques used by the Anglo-Saxons in spinning and weaving, as well as the embroidery and other techniques used to turn the cloth into beautiful, useable objects. As a part of this reconstruction, I have also tried to trace the relationships of trade and gender with textile production. Such an effort lays the necessary groundwork to understand textile metaphor in the context of its visual analogue. We can probably never know exactly what it was like to be surrounded by domestic textile production on a constant basis, but the conclusions which this first endeavor has suggested are the following: first, an understanding of Anglo-Saxon textile production is crucial in understanding and visualizing the textile metaphors of the Old English corpus, as the imagery of the textile riddles of *The Exeter Book* illustrates. Second, textile production was so common a visual analogue that most allusions to textile metaphor are not perceived as requiring explanation; in other words, textile imagery resonates for the Anglo-Saxons.

A second major endeavor of this thesis has been to try to contextualize the major textile metaphors of the Old English corpus—peaceweaving, death-weaving, fate-weaving, creation- and water-weaving, and word-weaving—in terms of both the visual analogue and the textual analogues of related cultures. Such an effort, while useful, can also be dangerous, in that “source hunting” and arguing for primacy of textual relationship one way or another can lead us to ignore a larger question, one which this
thesis has also attempted to address: why would the metaphor, if indeed it is adopted from elsewhere, be attractive to the author who uses it? If the metaphors resonate or are meaningful to the Anglo-Saxons, why are they? The question become more interesting as we consider the plethora of fate-weaving, creation-weaving, and word-weaving across many cultures. Why was the metaphor attractive to such a variety of peoples, as well as the Anglo-Saxons?

The one thing each culture examined has in common with the Anglo-Saxons is a basically similar process of spinning and weaving, and in most of the cultures, the women are the textile producers. The images of binding which attend the spinning and weaving process might have been the visual analogue to entrapment and death that connect death-weaving to textile production. Spinning and weaving also seem to have a magical quality about them, combining images of creation (perhaps at childbirth) and binding (at death) which might explain fate-weaving. Creation-weaving may resonate because the woven work is a marvel of intertwinnings and might have suggested a visual analogue as something new is created out of disparate elements. The weaving done by “water” may derive from the image of inter-woven currents that make sea travel possible, or perhaps from the personification of water as a female. Word-weaving is more difficult to comprehend, in large part because in some contexts, it seems related to oral weaving of poetry, and in others, textual. Greek poetry-weaving, as well as many of the Germanic examples of poetry-weaving, is connected to oral performance. Was this related to a visual analogue between songs at the harp and the loom? Was the metaphor a tribute to the poet who could intertwine so many different narrative and aural strands in a
masterfully woven aural web? Is the Latin textual tradition of word-weaving based on an interweaving of the physical form of words, instead? Perhaps word-weaving suggests all of these things.

The one textile metaphor of the Old English corpus which does not seem to have a clear analogue in other cultures is the peaceweaver. There are a few examples from Greek literature which are somewhat similar. The Greek writer Pausanias explains why a group of sixteen women is chosen to weave a robe for Hera every four years; they represent sixteen women who were once chosen as a peace delegation between Elis and Pisa. After making peace, the women were placed in charge of the ceremonies of celebration, which included holding games to bring the people together and weaving a robe for Hera. The women are peacemakers as well as weavers, but they are not known as peaceweavers. A similar, but more comic connection of women, spinning, and peace occurs in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, in which the women of Athens put a stop to an internal war through diplomacy and simply refusing to tend to their looms and children until the men sue them for peace. Lysistrata, the leader of the women, tells the city commissioner their plan: “‘As we do with our thread: when it is tangled, we take it and raise it with our spindles here and there. In the same way we would dissolve this war . . . untangling the thread by means of ambassadors sent here and there.’” The women see their spinning as a metaphorical mode of making peace, but they are also not referred to as peaceweavers. The apparent originality of the Old English epithet (which may be a matter of a lost tradition of oral poetry) is somewhat surprising, given the common role women played in Germanic societies as well as Greek as peacemakers through diplomacy.
and marital ties. However, it is also beneficial in that it forces us to set aside source-seeking and deal once again with the important question interwoven throughout this undertaking: why might the Anglo-Saxons have created or at least found the concept of weaving peace a resonant metaphor?

When Penelope seeks to rid herself of her problems in the Odyssey, she has very few resources on which she can draw. What finally remains to her is her prescribed role as a weaver, and this is how she copes with her problem: she weaves and unweaves. But Penelope is also depicted as thinking as a weaver. When asked about her stratagem, she states, “I weave my own wiles” (XIX.137-156). Her weaving is her strategy, but it is also her perspective. The poet extends her actions as a domestic weaver to her actions of subterfuge. The metaphor is inspired by her gendered role as a weaver. Although, as indicated in Chapter 3, one of the peaceweavers is the “male” angel of “Elene,” and the diplomatic endeavors of the peaceweaver between parties suggest metaphorical weaving, ultimately, the metaphor probably reflects the perspective of those assigned the distaff, spindle, and loom by their society: the women who used them.

What made each textile image resonant to the Anglo-Saxons? Ultimately, this question is to some extent unanswerable. Many of us would find it hard to explain the resonance of a metaphor deeply imbedded in our own cultures, let alone one which belongs to another people and another time. And yet, an effort to understand these metaphors in textile terms allows us to catch a glimpse of an often forgotten, daily task of the Anglo-Saxons. A culture, in many ways, is as much a product of its daily tasks as its warlike accomplishments, and Old English literature provides glimpses that the domestic
labor at distaff, spindle, and loom formed a part of the imaginative spectrum of metaphorical possibility among the Anglo-Saxons.

Notes

Conclusion

2. Scheid and Svenbro 15.
Appendix A: Index of Words Discussed

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<td>hrisil/hrisel</td>
<td>wefl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huma/uma</td>
<td>weft/wifte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hweorfan</td>
<td>weolocreada tælgh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspin</td>
<td>windan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loma/geloman</td>
<td>wloh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lorg/lorh</td>
<td>wulcamb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meoduma/meodoma</td>
<td>wulmod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nædle</td>
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<tr>
<td>pihten</td>
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<tr>
<td>presse</td>
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<tr>
<td>scearræ</td>
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<tr>
<td>sceadæle</td>
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<tr>
<td>scytel</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1For variant spellings, see the notes for each word in the chapters in question. The words listed are Old English words unless otherwise specified.

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spinlhealfe
-stere
towhus of wuie
towmyderce
webba
webhus
wif

Chapter 3
bewindan
bregdan
droðwebba
droðwebbe
friðsibb
gydene
handgewribene
hægtessan
hlæw
ides
sigewif
wælcyrige

Chapter 4
casus (Latin)
condicio (Latin)
Ertae
eventus (Latin)
fatum/fata (Latin)
fors (Latin)
forta (Latin)
gescraf, gescrifan
gewefan
gewiofu/gewif
metan
metena
metod
metodsceaf
Moirai, moira (Lachesis, Atropos.
Clothos) (Greek in Latin script)
nornir (Old Icelandic)
Parcae (Latin)
sors (Latin)
urðir (Old Icelandic)
wyrdd

Chapter 5
enterlace (Middle English)
entrebecar los motz (Old French)
gangel-wæfre/gange-wifre
gangewifran nett
letteres loken (Middle English)
quante Inglis (Middle English)
sode gebunden
spiderwiht (manuscript spidenwiht)
spinnan
spither (Middle English)
textere/textus (Latin)
wæfer-gange
wordcraeftum wæf
wordum wrixlan

Chapter 6
peaceweaving (Modern English)
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