



10-2022

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Recommended Citation

Weber, Wendolyn (2022) "The Case for Hildeburg: *Beowulf* and Ethical Subjectivity," *Quidditas*: Vol. 43, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol43/iss1/4>

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The Case for Hildeburg: *Beowulf* and Ethical Subjectivity

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This essay argues for a reading of Beowulf, and the female peaceweaver figures therein, in contemporary philosophical terms of Levinasian ethical subjectivity. Such a reading illuminates the peaceweaver, often caught between action and passivity and viewed as a victim of death-driven masculinist heroic culture, as an exemplar rather of the radical destabilization experienced through ethical subjection and an important key to the complexities of the heroic ethos. It illustrates the enduring value of texts such as Beowulf to inform our understanding of often oversimplified concepts like that of the “warrior ethos” in contemporary culture.

The heroic war-band ethos is surprisingly ubiquitous in modern culture. We consume its fictional film and print articulations as entertainment and partake of its virtual versions on any number of gaming platforms. There is something of the war band in any competitive team sports league. In the modern military, small-unit cohesion remains extremely important to the success of troops on the ground. We respect the war band tenets of bravery and loyalty, of self-sacrifice and stoicism. We create fantasies of its gritty effectiveness in response to life’s frightening complexities. We have allowed it to inform an appreciation for strongman-types in public life and government. The warrior mode seems to offer a bracing tonic against flabby liberal elitism in a dangerous world. It injects itself in volatile ways into social movements and peaceful protest. But what does the ‘warrior ethos’ truly mean? The fierce loyalty of us-versus-them and the resolve to do-or-die may be essential in combat. It may be relatively harmless in the contexts of larping, tailgate parties, and the bowling league. It may seem useful and reassuring in the face of complex and abstract threats. But if we mean to embrace the steely perceived positives of warrior culture in contemporary contexts, then perhaps we should take more time to consider what that ethos fully entails.

The Old English epic *Beowulf* provides a useful model for such an inquiry. However, it is not necessarily the hero himself, but rather

the peripheral and referential figures populating the poem who ultimately offer the fullest picture of *Beowulf's* complex ethics of heroism. In this essay I propose Hildeburg, the tragic queen from the Finnsburg poem-within-the-poem, as an important case study in this regard. Hildeburg belongs to the vexed category of the peaceweaver in the heroic mode, and more specifically that category of the failed peaceweaver; as a character in one of the many contemplative tale-telling digressions throughout the epic poem, she also serves as a narrative counterpoint to the primary action in the text. The poem's representation of Hildeburg the failed peaceweaver is not simply that of a character playing a role within the primary heroic plot but that of an aesthetic object: an aesthetic object that serves as such to trace the contours (paradoxical, inaccessible) of ethical experience. The embedded literary function of Hildeburg modulates Beowulf's personal do-or-die heroic ethos, grounding the hero-in-isolation in a broader ethical meditation. In contrast to Beowulf's heroic aesthetics of glory in combat, Hildeburg opens a melancholy heroic that dwells on and is conveyed through an aesthetics of failure.

Notably, Hildeburg makes her appearance in the poem following Beowulf's first great success. At the banquet celebrating Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, but also shortly before Grendel's mother attacks, Hrothgar's *scop* relates the story of the battle at Finnsburg: Hildeburg is wife of Finn, a Frisian, and sister of Hnæf, a Dane. Finn treacherously attacks Hnæf and his men while they are visiting, and Hildeburg's brother and son, fighting on opposite sides, are both killed. Following an uneasy truce for the remainder of the winter, Hnæf's men kill Finn and take Hildeburg back to Denmark. While the violent action is perpetrated by the men, Hildeburg meanwhile stands both at the edges and in the center of that action. Socially speaking, Hildeburg is the tie that binds, through marriage, these two groups, yet her centrality as the noble wife is negated, and she is pushed to the periphery as a non-participant, when violence erupts. Formally speaking, we also see her occupying both the edges (front and rear) and the center of the narrative: the *scop* begins from her vantage point, returns to her in between battle episodes as she

oversees the funeral of her brother and son, and ends with her return to her people.

With these marital misfortunes, Hildeburg has been considered a prime example of the paralyzing nature of a peaceweaver's position in a heroic mode that tends more often toward violence than calm. Jane Chance has pointed to the queer mix of action and passivity, the passiveness apparently inherent in the act of peaceweaving, in the peaceweaver's role: as the symbolic knot that ties two groups, she is herself bound by her role, thus necessarily incapable of action, should the alliance fail. Chance notes that Hildeburg exemplifies this bind, and adds that in the face of such failure, she faces the obliteration of her very identity, as well.¹ Hildeburg's apparent powerlessness and voicelessness in the episode has intrigued Gillian Overing to the extent that she has taken Hildeburg rather than Wealhtheow as the paradigmatic peaceweaver in the text. Hildeburg, Overing argues in her book *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, is "a victim par excellence" whose role in the account emphasizes "the utter nonsignification" of woman as peaceweaver and serves to expose the "paradoxical demands" of a system "that ostensibly champions her as its cause" but in fact ensures her failure.²

Drawing from Derrida and Lacan, among others, Overing employs the hysteric, as defined by Cixous and Clement in *The Newly Born Woman*, as an appropriate model for the women in *Beowulf*. She argues, "women have no place in the death-centered, masculine economy of *Beowulf*; they have no place to occupy, to speak from."³ Cixous and Clement offer hysteria as a psychological model for a linguistic space that defies and disintegrates the rationality of masculine, phallic, discourse. It is the disorder that rises up within and against the symbolic system's oppressive order. Yet Overing also reads *Beowulf* as "an already deconstructed, even a continually

1 Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, 100.

2 Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, 81, 85.

3 Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, xxiii.

self-deconstructing, text.”⁴ And if the text itself is a continually self-deconstructing one, then the hysterical mode might extend beyond the women and throughout the text to include male and female alike. This would be the first point in my case for Hildeburg: that we might read her exemplarity and her role within the heroic ethos in terms other than those of patriarchal foreclosures. In doing so, we might benefit from thinking of her not as a victim (of patriarchy, of a masculine death-drive), but rather as a hostage, in Levinasian terms of ethical subjectivity.

The heroic culture is a potentially fraught staging ground for Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of subjecthood as defined by an absolute responsibility borne by the self to an external Other. Levinas’s notion of the subject as hostage to this responsibility, particularly with its foundational reference to the directive, “you shall not kill” (the experience of which demand constitutes, in Simon Critchley’s view, “the basic operation of Levinas’s entire work”⁵), does not necessarily seem to jibe well with a heroic culture in which killing is a matter of course. The model whereby I kill the other before me seems rather a rejection of that ethical responsibility. But in the heroic culture, the responsibility borne to the immediate, face-to-face other is often complicated by a responsibility to another other, either living or dead. For all the focus on personal glory, service plays a large role in the heroic ethos. We might read heroic violence as the quintessential repetition compulsion, the death drive fully realized and woefully unsublimated, but we might also bring into consideration Levinas’s thoughts on the third party, the other other: “The third party introduces a contradiction” in the relation between self and other that was until then unidirectional. “It [the third party] is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?”⁶ Levinas also suggests that it is the entry of the third that creates consciousness, systems,

4 Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, xiii.

5 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 57.

6 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 157.

and the intelligibility thereof: “In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness.”⁷

This perception of and obsession with “all the others than the other,” crying out for justice, demanding measure and knowing, fosters a distinctly uncomfortable consciousness. Tom Sparrow, considering the “excessive strangeness” of the face of the Levinasian Other in terms of Timothy Morton’s ecologically-oriented work, offers the following:

When I realize that my freedom, action, and responsibility are intimately connected to the freedom and vulnerability of countless other humans and nonhumans, and that these others not only exceed my ability to cognize their plurality, but even exceed my ability to grasp their singularity, I realize that I am caught up in what Morton calls “the mesh.” The mesh is another name for the coexistence and codependence that marks life on Earth. The mesh refers us to how, when we try to conceive the vastness of ecological life — and the way in which everything whatsoever is connected to everything else — we discern that there is neither center nor edge of the environment.⁸

The messy justice system of the heroic mode does not necessarily include recognition of this un-cognizable coexistence. But the failures of heroic peace-keeping illustrate what we might characterize as an overflow of justice that enacts the problem of violence-as-justice within the mesh of plural responsibilities. The peaceweaver, who is both central and peripheral to her particular instance of peace-in-dissolution, who according to Overing has no place to occupy or to speak from in the death-driven heroic economy, perhaps exemplifies the radical destabilization that is ethical subjection.

Overing emphasizes Hildeburg’s passivity and silence in the face of such peace-keeping failures in order to make an argument about women within what has historically been read as an exclusively masculine discourse. She argues that women must carve out their fleeting moments of alterity by forcing ambiguity, leveraging with

⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 158.

⁸ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 78-79.

paradox, and it is thus Hildeburg's very silence and effacement that reveals her "trace" – an image delineated by her absence that allows her to declare the paradox of her position. It is in this trace that Overing sees the most positive and active attributes of her character: "The silence she creates affronts, forces a confrontation with unresolvable ambiguity, declares paradox. [...] Her silence is actively experienced as an other desire that momentarily collapses the ever-forward momentum toward death of dominant desire; she serves other forms of movement and potential as she embodies and enacts the web of difference."⁹ This is an interesting and powerful idea that I would like to extend beyond the parameters of gender difference and consider in terms of action and responsibility, duty (heroic and otherwise) and the sometimes impossible weight thereof. Stacy S. Klein also argues that the women in *Beowulf* "do not simply introduce ambiguity and disorder into this world and then abandon it in a kind of chaotic state of choric confusion;" rather, they "gesture toward the possibility of a new model of heroism that redefines, and incorporates the energies of, preconversion Germanic heroism so as to bring it more closely in line with the Christian worldview of the poem's readers."¹⁰

Klein characterizes this Christian influence as prescribing "a new model of heroism premised on turning the violent energies of heroic self-assertion inward and waging battles against one's inner vices rather than against human foes."¹¹ Klein's arguments are compelling, but somewhere in between her suggestions and Overing's, and in between the pagan heroic and its Christian reconfiguration, we might see Hildeburg gesturing toward a different internalization, focused not so much on conquering personal, inner vices as on accepting the intimate, boundary-blurring interrelation of self and other. As Sparrow puts it, "the Other is present in me as the source

9 Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, 87.

10 Klein, *Ruling Women*, 88-89.

11 Klein, *Ruling Women*, 89.

of my freedom to respond to the Other's needs."¹² Or Critchley: "At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of hetero-affectivity. In other words, the inside of my inside is somehow outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness."¹³ Or Levinas: "The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself [...] of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am."¹⁴

Drawing both from Levinas and from Løgstrup's idea of a one-sided, unfulfillable ethical demand, Critchley proposes an "ethics of discomfort, a hyperbolic ethics based on the internalization of an unfulfillable ethical demand."¹⁵ As Critchley posits it, ethical subjectivity is founded on a demand that is profoundly paradoxical in that it is unfulfillable and asymmetrical. Ethics, Critchley argues, should be infinitely demanding: "There is a curvature of intersubjective space that makes my relation to the other asymmetrical. Furthermore, this curvature shapes the inner space of subjectivity itself, where the subject is defined in terms of a division between itself and an exorbitant demand that it can never meet, the demand to be infinitely responsible. The ethical subject shapes itself in relation to a demand that splits it open."¹⁶ It is that splitting-open, both in regard to the exorbitant demand in the face of the other and also in the multiple faces of the plurality of other others, the question of justice within the ungraspable mesh of coexistence, that emerges repeatedly in the expressions of heroic ethos and failure portrayed in *Beowulf*.

In the regular outbreaks of kinstrike and the apparent failure of women (and men) to maintain peace we might therefore see the ultimate futility of the peaceweaver role. Hildeburg must stand by

12 Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 79.

13 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 61.

14 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 112.

15 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 11.

16 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 69.

powerless at the deaths of her brother, son and husband, waiting to be carried back to her relatives once all is lost. Yet she is not completely inactive in this passage, nor does failure necessarily equate with futility. The *scop*'s opening designates her as a grim surveyor of the battlefield, bemoaning the work of destiny; she also takes control of the funeral preparations, commanding “that her own son be given over to the fire, that his body be burnt on Hnæf’s funeral pyre, and to place [him] on the pyre at the shoulder of [his] uncle” (“Het ða Hildeburg / æt Hnæfes ade / hire selfre sunu / sweoloðe befæstan, / banfatu bænan / ond on bæl don / eame on eaxle” (1114-1117a). Hildeburg’s gesture continues her peaceweaving function as it emphasizes the breakdown that has occurred. She reestablishes the bond between her brother and son by placing them together for cremation, shoulder to shoulder – another reference to the relationship they should have maintained in battle. The two burning bodies now join in one trail of smoke winding upward to the sky. If the peace her marriage was supposed to create has been broken, she will at least remind everyone that such a breach should not have happened. She foregrounds the splitting of loyalties that has torn apart her family. In the end, she will return to Denmark and her kin, as the entire marriage is dissolved with the death of Finn.

The Finnsburg episode is thus a cautionary tale – a reminder that peace has a tendency to erupt into violence, that joy can be replaced by the slaughter of kinsmen. In a period of revelry, the *scop* takes the time to remind us – and his listeners in Heorot – that it cannot last. While we are told that the poem is received with good humor in the mead hall, the emphasis in this tale is notably on the tragedy of peaceful ties broken, not on the glory of warfare. The first half of the episode focuses on Hildeburg’s loss, her transition from the greatest of worldly joy to loss of everyone dearest to her. The second half of the episode is concerned primarily with Hengest’s revenge dilemma, but here, too, we find no exuberant savagery. There is the swearing of oaths, intended to seal the truce, and the long winter Hengest spends stranded at his enemy’s court. With the green of spring, he is swiftly persuaded to exact vengeance despite all oaths to the contrary. From

here, everything moves quickly. Finn's death occupies just one incidental half-line, "swilce Fin slægen," "and Finn was also slain" (1152b). This vengeance is a denouement, if a necessary one, to the original treachery and painful truce, and it is treated as such. More lines are devoted to the winter weather prohibiting Hengest's travel than to the battle when the Danes return for revenge. The swiftness with which Finn's hall is reddened, the king slain, and spoils and queen alike packed – furtively, almost – back to Denmark reflects the inherent sense of grim, not glorious, necessity. The *scop* himself references the wastefulness of such bloodshed with the remark, at the burning of Hnæf and his nephew, "wæs hira blæd scacen," "their glory was passed away" (1124b). If Hildeburg's losses are the focal point in this instance, Hrothgar has similarly bemoaned his fallen condition after Grendel's unexpected attacks. Once young, strong, and successful, joyful and prosperous, he has become old and feeble, his brilliant hall falling into ruin. Though Beowulf has rid Heorot of Grendel, the tale of Finnsburg also underscores what the poet has already told us at the beginning of the poem: Heorot is destined to burn, and Hrothgar's line to fail.

Hildeburg also creates a bridge to Wealhtheow at this point, who enters following the *scop*'s recitation and offers some peaceweaving and political reminders of her own. Wealhtheow exemplifies the peaceweaver at work in the hall. In bearing cups to guests and retainers, weaving bonds between the drinkers, and giving advice, the peaceweaver is at her most politically active. While we do not see Hildeburg in this active function, the tale of her fate arguably motivates and informs Wealhtheow's actions on a number of levels. She tempers Hrothgar's enthusiastic adoption of Beowulf (1171-1174), reminds him of his duties to their children (1178-1180), and reminds her nephew Hrothulf of his debt to his uncle – and thus also of his duty to behave well toward her sons, should Hrothgar die before they are fully grown (1180-1187).

Wealhtheow is referred to by Beowulf himself as "friðusibb folca" (2017a), "peace-bond of people" – a very similar term

to “freoðwebbe,” “peaceweaver.” She seems to exemplify the characteristics that go along with the designation. As John Sklute has noted, the word in fact only appears three times in extant Old English poetry: once in *Widsith*, once in *Elene*, and once in *Beowulf*. In *Elene*, “fælre freoðwebban” (dative), “faithful peaceweaver,” refers to the angel who appears to Constantine. The angel serves as messenger, a diplomat between God and man, thus weaving bonds of peace between heaven and earth. In *Widsith*, it refers to a certain queen Ealhild, the historical wife of Eormanric, king of the Ostrogoths, who gains praise for herself and her husband’s court through her nobility and munificence – giving a precious ring to the poet. Combined then with Wealhtheow as “friðusibb,” Sklute concludes that the term “peaceweaver” must specifically refer to an individual performing distinct and active functions. The word 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.”¹⁷

Given the specific peace-promoting connotations of “peaceweaver,” the irony behind the use of the word in *Beowulf* in the story of Modthryth is all the more apparent. Modthryth is the foul-tempered young lady who demands the death of any suitor or retainer who gazes at her, daring to meet her eye. “Terrible outrages” (“firen ondrysne” (1932b) are attributed to her:

Nænig þæt dorste deor geneþan
 wæsra gesiða, nefne sin-frea,
 æt hire an dæges eagem stæde
 ac him wæl-bende weotode tealde,
 hand-gewriþene; hraþe seoþðan wæs
 æfter mund-gripe mece geþinged,
 þæt hit sceaden-mæl scyran moste,
 cwealm-bealu cyðan. Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw
 idese to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy,
 þætte freoðu-webbe feores onsæce
 æfter lige-torne leofne mannan. (1933-1943)

17 Sklute, “‘Freoðwebbe’ in Old English Poetry,” 208.

(None of the gentle [possibly 'her own'] retainers dared boldly approach her, unless he were an over-lord. Whoever looked her in the eyes by daylight might consider hand-woven slaughter-bonds to be prescribed for him. Quickly thereafter was it settled with a blade, the damascened-sword must strike, make known the death-bale. That is not a queenly custom for a lady to follow, although she be beautiful, that a peace-weaver should deprive a beloved man of life after a fancied insult.)

The unpleasant Modthryth is mentioned as a contrast with Hygelac's generous young queen, Hygd, but we also learn that the legend includes her reform. Conceding to her father's wishes, Modthryth allows herself to be wedded and mends her ways once married to the admirable king Offa. He teaches her to give up her slaughter-bonds and turn to the more acceptable pursuits of peace-weaving proper. Her noble love for the great chieftain inspires her to good deeds, and she becomes a model queen. We might see here an allegory for the death drive as unbridled pursuit of desire, manifested in the maiden's effort to assert autonomy against heteronomous responsibility by completely negating the face of the other, and successfully sublimated through the aesthetic experience and social/symbolic contract of wedded bliss.

Modthryth is rather hyperbolic as a character, like a poetic encapsulation of what it is to exist within a system situated right on the threshold between chaotic violence and non-violent order, where justice also balances precariously between the two. The story of Modthryth offers a happy ideal where unbridled violence transforms into peace, but we might also keep in mind the presence of her husband, whose own exemplarity as a king is likely based in no small part on his capacity for military might.

Grendel's mother offers the unhappy version of the balancing act, rising up just when everyone thinks peace has been restored. But it is also important to note that unlike Modthryth's violent rejection of the gaze of the other, Grendel's mother works within the system of blood vengeance. The question is merely whether her pursuit of justice is justifiable. Eileen Joy has characterized

Grendel as a “*terroristic* figure” whose violence “challenges the code of hospitality that founds Hrothgar’s great hall [...] while it simultaneously expresses a kind of excess of the very same violence that helped build that hall,” thus inviting us to explore questions about what she suggests are the “vexed connections between ethics, violence, and sovereignty [...] both in the early Middle Ages and in our own time.”¹⁸ Grendel the terrorist guest literally brings home the abjected violence underpinning social order. Grendel’s mother functions in a similar vein. And if Grendel and his mother represent disruptions-from-without that eerily reflect the structures of within, then Finnsburg and the ultimate fall of Heorot epitomize disruption-from-within that unsettlingly illustrates just how internal the abjected outside really is.

Hildeburg’s single action within the Finnsburg episode is her belated peaceweaving gesture at the funeral pyre. It is indeed no more than a gesture – a trace, as it were, of what should have been through what should not have happened, but did – epitomized by the trail of smoke, the trace of burning bodies, curling into the clouds. Hildeburg weaves a tapestry not of amnesty forged through verbal and material exchange, but of regret marked by the wafting ashes of her kin. If *Wealhtheow* models the active behavior and *Modthryth* offers an ironic reversal, Hildeburg’s is, here, the negative reflection of peaceweaving. While the smoke is the trace of the warriors’ glory that has passed, Hildeburg’s funeral placements form the trace of that peaceweaving we never saw, and that failed at any rate, and it is this absence that informs *Wealhtheow*’s active presence in Hrothgar’s hall (which will also ultimately fail). The Finnsburg episode creates a moment of collapse in the momentum of renewed peace and glory created by *Beowulf*’s destruction of Grendel, and a collapsing-down of the entire narrative into a single episode that encapsulates one of the most vexed relationships of the heroic mode, that between war and peace.

¹⁸ Joy, “‘In his eyes stood a light, not beautiful’: Levinas, Hospitality, *Beowulf*,” 61, 60.

Finnsburg likely entertains its listeners for two somewhat contradictory reasons. On the one hand, it presents an instance of inexplicably failed diplomatic ties, and thus a collapse in the regular systems of order. Such breakdowns were apparently popular to their medieval audiences (and remain so to this day), for reasons that might include a thirst for disaster but probably also relate to that second of the entertainment factors, that the worst and most dire circumstances always seem to give rise to the most heroic deeds by those caught up in them. Finnsburg contains the vengeance dilemma as well, philosophical food for thought as Hengest negotiates the relative values of two imperatives in conflict: the oaths he has sworn to Finn versus the duty to avenge his dead friend and lord. Hengest cannot but fail in the face of two conflicting responsibilities: to honor one is to betray the other.

The Finnsburg episode, particularly as portrayed through the eyes of Hildeburg, is thus an example of a melancholic heroic, an aesthetics driven by failure and emphasizing transience and loss. It offers a critical key to the rest of the text, as *Beowulf* itself slips back and forth between glory and melancholy, brilliance and decline. *Beowulf* as a continuously self-deconstructing text, a text constantly shifting in reference to itself, oscillates between hope and disaster, splitting open the structures of social and heroic order to reveal the unresolvable ambiguities and paradoxes within. For those of us who know that Heorot will ultimately burn (and we all do, because the poet has told us so), Finnsburg pricks the balloon of triumph over Grendel. That the audience within the text does not apparently recognize this fact only adds to the poignancy of the reference. Yet it is also Hildeburg who propels us forward again, who, even in the midst of her own failure – in fact, as a result of her failure, or of the narrative of her failure – provides her cue to Wealhtheow, who offers yet another swing of the pendulum. Grendel's mother completes the trio of symbolically significant women appearing in quick succession, reintroducing trauma into the mead hall with her insistence on blood vengeance for her son. The poem does not want us to get too comfortable.

Discomfort and trauma play important roles in heroic melancholy. Critchley also underlines the important element of trauma in the formation and function of ethical subjectivity, that for Levinas the ethical demand is a traumatic demand: “The ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart [...] it is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject.”¹⁹ But this trauma is not a bad thing. It is a necessary thing:

The Levinasian subject is a traumatized self, a subject that is constituted through a self-relation that is experienced as a lack, where the self is experienced as the inassumable source of what is lacking from the ego — a subject of melancholia, then. But, this is a good thing. It is only because the subject is consciously constituted through the trauma of contact with the real that we might have the audacity to speak of goodness, transcendence, compassion, etc.; and moreover to speak of these terms in relation to the topology of desire and not simply in terms of some pious, reactionary and ultimately nihilistic wish-fulfillment.²⁰

That this trauma is good and right does not, of course, make it any easier to endure. Critchley further notes that the Levinasian ethics, its subject effectively a traumatic neurotic, also therefore risks being “disastrously self-destructive to the subject.”²¹ Sublimation therefore plays an essential role in this scheme. He asks, “How can I respond in infinite responsibility to the other without extinguishing myself as a subject? Doesn’t traumatic ethical separation require aesthetic reparation?”²² Drawing from Lacan (who draws from others, as well, for this formulation), Critchley posits the importance of artistic creative production for the work of sublimation. Sublimation *is* creative artistic activity that “takes the human being to the limit of a

19 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 62-63.

20 Critchley, *Ethics — Politics — Subjectivity*, 195.

21 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 68.

22 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 69.

desire which cannot be fully represented. The work of sublimation traces the outline of something sublime, the aesthetic object describes the contour of the Thing, *la Chose, das Ding*, at the heart of ethical experience.”²³ And this is where we should recall that *Beowulf* is itself an aesthetic object. With its stories within stories and shifting frames, it reminds us of that fact. Hildeburg meanwhile is an aesthetic object within an aesthetic object. Sparrow, explaining Levinas’s description of art as “the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow,” suggests that “Art [...] enables us to catch sight of a mode of experience that necessarily unfolds between the conscious and the unconscious. It evinces a liminal experience that lies somewhere between the potential and the actual, the latent and the explicit, the transparent and the obscure.”²⁴ This would be Hildeburg’s and the Finnsburg episode’s function, for its layered audiences, both within the poem and outside of it, viewing the episode within the context of its telling. The aesthetic object is not a mirror but a re-presentation, here a negotiation and working-through of the heroic ethos in all the forms it takes and the failures that it entails. It is the poem that traces the outline of the impossible and ungraspable, but that also offers sublimation, aesthetic reparation, in the face of infinite demand.

In the failed peaceweavings of the heroic mode, we often see the contradiction of the third, the question of justice, the responsibility, in the face of the other, to an other other and the interwoven-ness of intersubjectivity, all in perilously close proximity to the ultimate limit and end of desire: death. But we should not read these failures as foreclosures of the role, or of the women who play it; the peaceweaver epitomizes the tangled, impossible web of ethical intersubjectivity. Hildeburg’s position as peaceweaver, caught in a middle state between action and passivity, bound by a role that in defining her identity also threatens to obliterate it in the face of failure,

23 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 73.

24 Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 28.

also embodies the impossible position of the subject-as-hostage. Hildeburg and Hengest, both bound and split by the overwhelming weight of their duties, are two sides of the same coin, two instances of the same self-deconstruction of a heroic ethos constantly working through the dual imperatives of duty and violence.

When we embrace the “warrior ethos,” particularly when we attempt to carry and apply it beyond the narrow boundaries of the battlefield, this then is what we should keep in mind: the peaceweavers and their failures, the oath-swearers and duty-upholders who find themselves caught in a mesh of conflicting responsibilities. Beowulf himself is ultimately a failure: for all his heroic feats, and though he may die gloriously after subduing a dragon, he also leaves his people without an heir to the throne, plunged into political instability, with enemies at the borders. These portraits of failure ultimately serve us far better than delusions of heroic invincibility and false ethical simplicity. Failure, Critchley argues, is essential to ethics: “But far from failure being a reason for dejection or disaffection, I think it should be viewed as the condition for courage in ethical action.”²⁵

Hence the case for our attention to Hildeburg.

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²⁵ Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 55.

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Beowulf: Nowell Codex, 11th century