THE POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD

The abbess-mothers of Kent, the queen-mothers of Wessex and Mercia, and the fictional mothers of Beowulf clarify the goals of maternal practice both in Anglo-Saxon England and in the late-twentieth-century United States. Desires of mothers for their children—for medical care, safety, education, self-determination—speak across the gulf of a thousand years and illuminate our own society, where schoolyard shootings, lack of health insurance, inequitable school systems, and drug-related violence challenge maternal performers. Judith Butler, Sara Ruddick, and Luce Irigaray provided the theoretical basis for much of the vocabulary in the introduction of this study; that vocabulary will illuminate the actions not just of Wealhtheow and Mildrīð, I hope, but also of all maternal performers, men and women, biological mothers and not, who endeavor to protect, nurture, and teach children in any culture. Irigaray’s search for mother-daughter couples is not simply an exercise appropriate to mythology, history, and literature but a reminder of the continuing patrilineal focus of our own culture, in which children are automatically given the last names of their fathers at birth.

The previous chapters have served to remove, at least partially, the occlusion of motherhood from the included Anglo-Saxon texts. These specific examinations of mothers in Old English poetry and Anglo-Saxon history have interrogated what mothers do and how they do it—how they make their value systems and nurturing structures work in a patriarchal culture that occludes motherhood even as it celebrates fathers, patrilineal genealogy, violence, and heroic death. The maternal performances of all these mothers, both literary and historical, might serve as guides for late-twentieth-century culture.

In Beowulf, Modþryþo gives notice that biological motherhood does not guarantee maternal performance as her masculine, sword-wielding performance precludes any maternal relationship with her child. Hildesburgh enacts a maternal performance as she officiates at the funeral of her son whom she could not protect. Hygd’s (failed) diplomatic negotiations...
to keep her son off the throne and the Seawolf’s (failed) revenge and defense of her home both indicate the ways in which a mother can try to achieve agency in textual and cultural worlds governed mainly by masculine prerogative. Finally, Wealhtheow demonstrates a successful challenge to the heroic code as she negotiates to keep her sons safe with a value system based on relationships rather than conquests.

Similarly, Æðelflæd’s tenth-century defense of her kingdom and training of her daughter can be read as a maternal performance. Æðelflæd’s performance of compromise and avoidance of unnecessary violence demonstrates a mediation of patriarchal goals even as she performs within a patriarchal system. Analysis of Æðelflæd’s maternal genealogy reveals that she had a maternal community composed of her grandmother, aunt, mother, and daughter as well as the more-recognized paternal community of her father, husband, and brother. Her daughter may have entered a maternal community with her cousin Eadburg at Nunnaminster, a religious house founded by Ealhswid, Æðelflæd’s mother.

The abbess-mothers of seventh- and eighth-century Kent also provide evidence of a viable cultural system based on maternal performance of protection, nurturance, and teaching rather than acquisition of power and wealth. These women demonstrate a pattern in their lives in which a widow founds a double monastery on land she controls, through either her dowry or her widow’s inheritance. This monastery, with a link to the similar houses of Frankish Gaul, then becomes a house for the female members of the royal family, with the abbacy passed from the founder to her biological sister, daughter, or niece, who was either a widow or a virgin. The incomplete textual histories of these monasteries hint at specifically female and maternal communities within the patriarchies of church and state. Folio 210 of Lambeth Palace MS 427 shows a maternal ritual of greeting and consecrating a daughter, indicating structures within the minister that were different from, but not exclusive of, more conventional Christian institutions.

One issue hovering over any analysis of mothers, motherhood, mothering, or maternal performance is the possibility of men as maternal actors. Does a celebration of maternal performance exclude men? Ruddick says that it does not—and indeed men are slowly coming to accept traditional maternal roles in the late-twentieth-century United States. One question I hope this study will raise is the possibility of male maternal performers in Anglo-Saxon England.

In addition, I hope this study raises some awareness about maternal work in our own culture, which, while different from Anglo-Saxon England, has its own occlusions of motherhood. Daycare and education are still considered “women’s issues,” and hence not as important as other top-