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THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN IN ANGLO-SAXON SOCIETY AS PORTRAYED THROUGH LITERATURE



By Stephanie Singh, York University

Many modern-day critics who study the writings of the Anglo-Saxon period have commented on the apparent mistreatment or exclusion of women from society. The issue of gender roles and stereotypes is one that is constantly debated, specifically as it pertains to the relationship between women and power. This includes both their physical power or strength, and their capacity to influence and cause change. Because Old English literature was mainly recorded by men and “focuses largely on [the] masculine”¹, it is easy to feel that women were less important, or that their experiences have been overlooked. However, after a close reading of both the epic *Beowulf* and the poem “Wulf and Edwacer,” it becomes clear that women bore a great deal of power and sway, often more than men and sometimes more than entire tribes or clans. First will be an exploration of the might of Grendel’s mother and her dominance inseparable from her femaleness; second will be an evaluation of the power over court and kingdom held by Queen Wealhtheow; and finally will be a consideration of the peaceweavers in both texts, and their strength and bravery when facing the almost-impossible task of uniting enemies.

Many readers of *Beowulf* agree that the story can be split up into multiple sections, each part focusing on the defeat of a major foe in battle. Some critics feel that the inclusion of Grendel’s mother is “extraneous, or [view it] as a transitional passage”², and split the epic into only two parts instead of three, grouping into one section the battles against Grendel and his mother. Other analysts view this grouping as an attempt to minimize the fight against a female foe. However, from a close reading of the text it becomes clear that the battles are inseparable, and for reasons other than female exclusion. It is not until after the celebration of Grendel’s defeat that the rise of “another threat”³ becomes apparent. Her existence is known to the locals, who have told stories of “two ...creatures ...from some other world”⁴. The demonic male they called Grendel, yet the other being was known only as “a woman”⁵, and was not considered a threat until her entry into Heorot⁶. Had it not been for Beowulf killing her son, Grendel’s mother would never have presented herself in a violent manner to the soldiers. Her attack is a direct result and avenging of Grendel’s death and therefore these two battles must be linked into one section.

Critics point out that Grendel’s mother “lack[s] any identity independent of her son’s even in name”⁷. However this attachment in name to Grendel should not be viewed as an attack on female individuality. Instead, it is the peaceful nature of the female creature before Grendel’s death that had left the locals ignorant of her. The text states that she and her son “dwel[t] apart”⁸ and that little was known of them or of their past. It is only because Grendel had made himself an enemy to the humans that they identified him by name: a name given by the people, not by his mother⁹. It is not that Grendel’s mother has no identity, then, but rather that she has not been identified or singled out for her acts against humans.

¹ Christopher Baswell and Anne Holland Schotter (Eds.) “Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 1A. (New York, Longman, 2010).

² Christine Alfano, “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel’s Mother,” *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. Vol. 23 No. 1. (Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA, 1992), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/39g6c6rm>, 8.

³ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89

⁷ Alfano, “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity,” 12.

⁸ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The discussion of Grendel's mother typically focuses on her physical strength, seemingly made possible only by her defeminisation. She displays "implications of gender transgression and ambiguity" when she, instead of merely grieving the loss of her son, steps up in the typically-masculine role to take revenge¹⁰. Critics may also choose to focus on the fact that Grendel's mother has to fight with a knife or a sword, both phallic symbols hinting at the dominance of the male. Linking this power to the masculine implies that "[women] may be not-weak as long as they are not-women"¹¹. However to choose only these examples is to exclude textual evidence of true strength and force clearly identified with women. First it is important to note that, despite this being her first battle, Grendel's mother is "a hardier opponent than her son was"¹². Beowulf, who so easily defeated Grendel with his bare hands, when faced with the monster's mother "...felt daunted,/ the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell"¹³. Also significant is that Beowulf approached the battle with Grendel's mother dressed in chainmail and armed with weapons¹⁴, whereas he had met Grendel unshielded and in hand-to-hand combat¹⁵. Beowulf anticipates the forthcoming difficulty and does not consider the femaleness of his opponent as an indication of an easy victory. Grendel's mother, the "warrior-woman"¹⁶, then succeeds in emasculating the great warrior Beowulf. He had been "man enough" to face Grendel¹⁷, but against Grendel's mother, Beowulf's own masculinity and weaponry is insufficient. Had he not made use of the sword found in the woman's armory, the text leads readers to believe that Beowulf would have fallen in defeat¹⁸. This may be viewed as an implicit critique on the idea that women were considered weak and powerless, or that they must put on masculinity in order to be viewed as equals.

In her paper, Alfano presents the idea that the Old English terms used to describe Grendel's mother may be "an acknowledgement of [her] might as an adversary, not as an indication of her monstrous nature"¹⁹. The text likens her to the infamous—and female—"amazon warrior"²⁰, and it is clear that she was "physically capable of carrying out her desired vengeance"²¹. It must be noted that even with her physical might and the ease with which she broke into Heorot, until provoked Grendel's mother had been peaceful. Although "implicated in her child's monstrosity"²², the epic shows that this single instance of violence went against the passive mother's nature. Unlike Grendel who finds demonic glee in the torture and destruction of humans²³, his mother is motivated by grief and vengeance²⁴. Grendel who had spent each day "picturing the mayhem" that he would inflict by night is sharply contrasted by his mother²⁵, who quickly enacts her revenge and then is "desperate to get out, in mortal terror the moment she was found"²⁶. She does not take pleasure in the kill as Grendel did, but rather acts out

¹⁰ Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity," 5.

¹¹ Gillian Overing and Helen Bennett. "Anglo Saxon Studies: Gender and Power: Feminism in Old English Studies." *Medieval Feminist Forum*. Vol. 10 No. 1. Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, 1990, ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1563&context=mff, 18.

¹² Dorothy Carr Porter, "The Social Centrality of Women in *Beowulf*: A New Context." *The Heroic Age*. Issue 5. *The Heroic Age*, 2001-2. www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/5/porter1.html, 6.

¹³ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity," 2.

¹⁷ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 109.

¹⁹ Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity," 8.

²⁰ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 91.

²¹ Porter, "The Social Centrality of Women," 6.

²² Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity," 12.

²³ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 49.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

the customary obligation to avenge her fallen relative²⁷. Rather than abuse and terrorize with her superhuman strength she chooses to live peacefully: her power, then, is evident not only physically, but also in her restraint.

The Danish queen Wealhtheow is another neglected example of a woman with power, this time in a political sense. When the Geats first arrive on shore, Beowulf is forced to explain the intent of his arrival first to the coastal guards²⁸, and then to a warrior messenger²⁹, before being brought before the king and court³⁰. It is only after passing these three levels of security and scrutiny that the queen enters, and it is she who gives the final approval of the Geat warrior. Beowulf once again explains his intent, and this “pleased the lady well”³¹. The tension between the two clans in Heorot remains until the queen, satisfied with the valor of the newcomer, takes her seat at the table. Only then can the soldiers fall at ease, “the people happy, loud and excited”³².

Another example of Wealhtheow’s executive power is displayed in the mead cup tradition. When the Geats first arrive and are feasting in Heorot, Beowulf, as the newcomer, is the last to be served³³. Then when the mead cup is passed after Grendel’s defeat, Beowulf is served second only to the king³⁴. In her paper on *The Social Centrality of Women in Beowulf*, Dorothy Porter speculates that “[t]he difference may show that Beowulf has risen in status in the court since he kept his promise to kill Grendel”³⁵. This gesture is another demonstration of female power, the text indicating firstly that it is the queen who makes the decision to promote Beowulf, and secondly, that it is only after she serves him is the promotion confirmed.

During the same celebration while the warriors are being served, Wealhtheow makes two different addresses, first to the king and then to Beowulf. Previously, Hrothgar had made clear his intention to adopt Beowulf as heir to the Danish kingdom³⁶. The queen, however, while encouraging the generosity and alliance between the Danes and the Geats, advises the king to “...bequeath/ kingdom and nation to your kith and kin”³⁷. It is as though Hrothgar is acting rashly, emotionally—behaviour usually associated with women—and that it is the queen who intervenes to prevent the dismissal of her sons as heirs. As in the battle between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother, the man has been emasculated, yet without the masculinisation of their female counterparts. Throughout the entire epic Wealhtheow is held in the highest regard, referred to as “queenly and dignified”³⁸, with no indication that anyone views her as anything less than an idealized woman and a perfect hostess. Later at the end of her thanks and praise for Beowulf, the queen again asserts herself by saying that “...the ranks do as I bid”³⁹. In each case, “the poet gives [us] no reason to believe that her demands will go unheeded”⁴⁰. It is not only in the passing of the cup, then, but also in the speeches made by Wealhtheow that signify the importance of the queen and her role in the court, with power able to override even that of the king.

²⁷ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁵ Porter, “The Social Centrality of Women”, 2.

³⁶ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁰ Porter, “The Social Centrality of Women”, 3.

These examples are clear indications that the females do possess both physical and political strength and power. There are also instances in which responsibility is placed on the female to change things which no single person, man or woman, is able to change. This, of course, relates to the role of the peaceweaver, or “freothuwebbe”⁴¹ In this period, women were often given away in marriage in order to “secure peace among enemy or rival peoples”⁴². Those women whose marriage did not end the fighting between nations are frequently viewed as failures by modern critics⁴³. There is a strong and explicit criticism of this in *Beowulf* when he comments on the proposed marriage of Freawaru. Speaking to his king, Beowulf comments that “...generally the spear/ is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,/ no matter how admirable the bride may be”⁴⁴. The men of that society, then, were aware of the high potential for failure that existed in the role of the peaceweavers. They were also aware that the failure came from the actions of hotheaded men, and not as a result of female ineptitude.

Feminist critics focus mainly on the hardships endured by these women. Given away by their families they were forced out of their home, only to live with another tribe that would never fully accept them: Christopher Baswell writes that, “They are in a sense twice exiled”⁴⁵. A clear example of this is seen in the poet’s song about the Danish princess Hildeburh⁴⁶. This woman finds herself “pulled...between two loyalties”⁴⁷, with her family on one side, her husband and son on the other. Although Hildeburh “succeeded in her duty” by having children with the man to whom she was married⁴⁸, this did not stop the fighting between the two tribes and in the end she ended up losing husband, son and brother⁴⁹. Again in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the speaker laments her fate in being exiled from her home through forced marriage, and her inability to love the man she views not as a husband, but as an eadwacer⁵⁰, or “property-watcher”⁵¹.

In her paper on *Wulf and Eadwacer*, Dolores Frese makes the argument that the “emotional crux resides in the maternal rather than in the more narrowly erotic anguish”⁵². This makes the suffering of the speaker comparable to the motherly grief experienced by Hildeburh when she loses her son in battle⁵³. Taking Wulf as son and the speaker as his mother is the attempt by the critic to empower the female, as an “amorous woman” leaves the perceived power and dominance in the hands of the men between whom she is torn⁵⁴. It is as though the suffering of a mother is considered nobler than that of a “sexually tormented woman”⁵⁵. Rather than elevating the female, however, this view diminishes her true courage and the importance of her role in and for her tribe. Obligated by duty to leave her family and the man she loves, to marry a stranger for the sake of peace, her life is the gift she gives to her people. The debate over whether Wulf should be read as son or as lover serves only to distract from the true power and bravery of the peaceweavers. While it is evident that these women suffered immensely, what

⁴¹ Porter, “The Social Centrality of Women”.

⁴² Ibid., 4.

⁴³ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁴ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 139.

⁴⁵ Baswell, “Wulf and Edwacer,” 176.

⁴⁶ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 71.

⁴⁷ Porter, “The Social Centrality of Women,” 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 81.

⁵⁰ Baswell, “Wulf and Edwacer,” 177.

⁵¹ Dolores Warwick Frese, “*Wulf and Eadwacer*: The Adulterous Woman Reconsidered,” *Notre Dame English Journal*. Vol. 15 No. 1 The University of Notre Dame, 1983, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40063294>, 14.

⁵² Ibid., 7.

⁵³ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 73.

⁵⁴ Frese, “The Adulterous Woman Reconsidered,” 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

should be commended is their ability to maintain dignity and composure despite the hardships. Even though the marriage of Hildeburh did not prevent the death of her son or brother, she remained steadfast in her role as peacekeeper and continued to try to unite the two families, through death if not by life⁵⁶. Despite still feeling connected to their own people, both Hildeburh and Wulf's estranged lover hold true to their commitment and stay with their unloved husbands⁵⁷. This is the real sacrifice that is offered for the women's tribes: the resolution of strong women to do their part to rectify the wrongs committed by men.

Because much of Anglo-Saxon history was recorded by and about males, it is easy for critics to believe that women were "marginal, excluded figures" in society⁵⁸. However close readings of *Beowulf* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* show that, far from being sidelined, women held considerable power, both in physical strength as well as influence. Male figures are shown to act rashly and violently, out of strong emotion, with lack of thought for the future of themselves or their clan. Seeking only glory, the men are unable to bring about or maintain peace. It was the queen who was invested in the security and continuance of the kingdom; the female who proved the worthier opponent in battle; and the woman, whether lover or mother, who sacrificed herself to try to bring peace to her people. More than just a "matrilineal undercurrent"⁵⁹, then, it becomes clear that it is women who hold the power and the responsibility to hold society together.

⁵⁶ Heaney, *Beowulf*, 77.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁸ Porter, "The Social Centrality of Women", 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

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