The Delicate Matter of Survival

When contemplating a stereotypical scene from the dark ages one might imagine a booming feast in an extravagant hall, with a noble king sitting proudly at the head of the room, overlooking his host of mighty warriors who eat and drink cheerily to their triumph in combat. The women in this imagined scene would sit gracefully at the side of their man, serving as a hostesses and entertainers, but would never be revered in the way their masculine counterparts are - they are not warriors, but peacekeepers. Such a scene, while seeming to sprout from a Conan novella, would in fact mark several important characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon society that once possessed it. The bravest of warriors, who were seemingly always men, were honored for their dedicated service to the king, and received treasure and riches for their heroic actions. While the king himself bestowed the gifts, this action fell in line with a deep appreciation shared by the nation; without such brave heroes to stand against the terrifying “outsiders”, whoever they/it might be, the citizens would be helpless and vulnerable. For this reason, the Anglo-Saxon society revered the warriors who ensured their continued existence as a people. Beowulf and Judith were such warriors, and essentially the saviors of their respective peoples. The main difference, of course, is that Judith was not the rugged hulk of a man like Beowulf, but a gorgeous woman. If contemporary audiences read *Judith* more often than they did *Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxon culture would still be read as a society structured around courageous deeds, leadership, and bravery, but these deeds would be associated more freely with women.

In the time period that *Beowulf* and *Judith* were written, societies existed under the incessant threat of invasion by foreign peoples. As such, a nation’s survival was inextricably tied to its ability to defend itself from a hostile attack, to ward off enemies in combat and live to see another day. For this reason, the most prestigious and notable members of this society were those who had proven themselves in combat, earning the trust, respect, and loyalty of those they stood to defend. Both stories are centered around a distinct protagonist who takes incredible action to defend a nation from an alien presence. In *Beowulf*, the young Geatish warrior swims across oceans, uses his bare hands to tear limbs from a vaguely-described monster, and reclaims an immense store of treasure from a rather possessive dragon. While Beowulf’s actions are a direct reflection of his own courage, and cement his name in history, even this immaculate warrior is not invincible, and cannot succeed on his own. Though Beowulf intends to fight the dragon alone, a sole retainer named Wiglaf stays by his side, saying:

“As God is my witness

I would rather my body were robed in the same

burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body

than go back home bearing arms” (2650 - 2653)

This quote demonstrates how Wiglaf, like a young Beowulf, is ready to stand with his king until the very end, loyal in his service even in the face of unspeakable danger. He calls Beowulf his “gold-giver”, referring to the material goods he has received from his lord, which serve as tangible reminders that he bond shared between the King and warrior. Such a bond was essential to the survival of the nation, incentivizing both parties to help one another out. As a whole, the epic weaves the tale of how Beowulf transforms from a simple warrior into an honorable king, single-handedly saving two separate nations from the horrific creatures that threaten to vanquish them. While fantastical, Beowulf performs these feats due to his allegiance to the peoples of Denmark and Geatland. His service to Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, is given to repay a debt of honor owed by Beowulf’s father - this fact underscores the importance of forming alliances, as the Danes would have surely perished without Beowulf’s seemingly divine intervention. Similarly, praise is given to Judith after her noble actions bring great riches to the people of Bethulia, and deliver them from the invading Assyrian forces:

“All of that was earned by the warriors’ glory,

bold under the banners and in battle

through the prudent counsel of Judith,

the daring maiden.” (330-334)

Like Beowulf, Judith has delivered her people from imminent doom, and is revered by her constituents as a result. Despite the fear of her people, Judith takes the reigns, and puts her own life in extreme danger for the survival of her people. In both tales, the nation would have been unable to survive without the decisive action and excellent leadership of the protagonist, who embodies the courageous will and protective spirit that the Anglo-Saxons so believed in.

While Beowulf embodies the stereotypically rugged man-warrior, who would have rightfully been of importance to a patriarchal society, Judith destroys this classification, proving that women were just as capable of getting their hands dirty, and more than domestic entertainers. In fact, it is doubtful that Judith would have been successful in her pursuit of Holofernes’ life had she been a man:

“Then the notorious one, that lord of

cities, became happy in his mind: he intended to violate

that bright woman with defilement and with sin.” (57-59)

It is shown here that Holofernes has an interest in Judith because he wants to sleep with her - and though it would not be impossible for Holofernes to have such interest in a male, few men can resist the charms of such a stunning woman. She uses her female identity to her full advantage, presenting herself in a manner that will surely appeal to Holofernes’ masculine instincts. While her assassination could have been performed anywhere, it was particularly effective to slay the general in his own bed; Holofernes’ men refuse to violate this personal realm when seeking guidance, and find that it is too late once they draw back the curtain. Judith’s womanliness is the reason for her success, in addition to her bravery and faith, but her role certainly breaks down the traditional paradigm of a successful warrior within Anglo-Saxon culture. Wealtheow is arguably the most prominent woman in *Beowulf*, and receives little attention in comparison to other characters of the poem. In one of the few times that she is described:

“The Helming woman went on her rounds,

queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,

offering the goblet to all ranks,

treating the household and assembled troop” (620-623)

As Hrothgar’s men feast and Beowulf boasts of his impending victory over Grendel, Wealtheow carries herself about the hall, tending to the needs of the warriors and cultivating a sense of unity amongst the troops. This depiction is vastly different from that of Judith, who sits front and center within her eponymous tale. This bold distinction suggests that women typically were less prized than their male companions, but were equally capable of performing in combat when the need arose.

While the story of *Beowulf* epitomizes the traditional perception of the perfect Anglo-Saxon warrior, the tale of *Judith* also serves as an excellent sample of the bravery and loyalty that this society held in such high esteem. Beowulf and Judith are held up as role-models for future generations, forever remembered as leaders who stepped up in combat to defend their nations from wicked defilers. Though Judith is a woman, she does not resign herself to a supportive role like that of Wealtheow, electing instead to take action when the male warriors have given up. As such, both Beowulf and Judith equally represent the values of courage, leadership, and loyalty held dear by the legendary warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons.