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ENG 272

February 27th, 2023

### Of Monsters and Women: An Analysis of the Power of Women in *Beowulf*

In Anglo-Saxon society, women were not often portrayed participating in the heroics and challenges we see from the character Beowulf in the Old English poem. Femininity looked different with "The role of women in *Beowulf* primarily [depending] upon 'peace-making,' either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace-pledge or mother of sons" (Jane Chance Nitzsche, 1980). The queen, in *Beowulf*, demonstrates this method of "peace-weaving" through her passing of the cup at the table. *Beowulf* has two primary women of focus throughout the poem, Queen Wealhtheow and the mother of the monster Grendel. Both women play important roles in the text, their purpose moving beyond just the story. They both hold a considerable amount of power. *Beowulf's* purpose regarding women is to depict the certain ways women can hold their power while successfully maintaining societal roles. The women reflect on each other throughout their appearances in the poem, depicting different perspectives of feminine rage in revenge for their children, one through her words and the other through her actions. It is a poem about cultural anxieties and the roles women play in Anglo-Saxon society. Queen Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother reflect the line between playing with power and unleashing too much rage. It describes how if a woman crosses the line, she is forced to face consequences at the hands of men, labeled as a "monster" and something to be contained.

Female rage is a key theme for the women of *Beowulf*. Both Queen Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother suffer some kind of loss concerning their children. Wealhtheow is threatened by the King's favor towards the hero Beowulf, fearing her children will lose their opportunity for the throne. Grendel's mother is directly threatened by the loss of her son to Beowulf, left with nothing but revenge. It is with these circumstances that we see the women act on their rage and power. After King Hrothgar's statement of favor towards Beowulf, Wealhtheow gives him a neck ring telling him, "Be to my sons/ kind in your deeds, keeping them in joys!...The thanes united, the nation alert,/the troop, having drunk at my table, will do as I bid"(lines 1226-1231). Here, the act of giving Beowulf a neck ring is, at first glance, Wealhtheow following her peace-weaving role. But she is enraged at the threat Beowulf holds against her sons. Her peace-weaving disguised this rage, demonstrating her cleverness. She hands him the gift but is not complimenting Beowulf, instead instilling a threat to him to not step out of line. She demands him to remember her sons and warns him that she holds the real power, reminding him that the people at the table can and will "do as [she] bid[s]" if she wishes it. We see this rage and want for revenge in Grendel's mother as well with the death of her son. She immediately takes action, seeking to kill and take action against the men who ended her son's life. It is said that "She set upon the hall-guest and drew her knife,/broad and bright edged; she would avenge her boy,/ her only offspring" (lines 1545-1547). Grendel's mother's rage is monstrous and action based. She doesn't use her words to instill power and revenge, but her actions to claim what she wants. Both women serve as depictions throughout the poem of the lengths mothers go to for their children, their rage as a result of the actions of men, and what they do to resolve that.

This feminine rage raises a question: Why is Grendel's Mother's rage seen as bad and Queen Wealhtheow's is not? It is perhaps because Wealhtheow walks along society's line of

conformity, slowly testing it, while Grendel's mother directly crosses it and challenges it. She is challenging the cultural norms regarding women in Anglo-Saxon society, making her the monster and Wealhtheow not. She doesn't use peace-weaving to disguise her rage as Wealhtheow does, instead, she acts on it. When she breaks into the hall it is stated that "The horror was less by as much as a maiden's strength,/a woman's warfare, is less than an armed man's/ when a bloodstained blade, its edges strong,/hammer-forged sword, slices through/ the boar-image on a helmet opposite" (lines 1282-1286). At this moment, Grendel's Mother presents a cognitive threat, demonstrating gender distinctions in *Beowulf's* society. To the men in *Beowulf*, the horror of having one's head cut off is less than if it was done by a woman. It is why Grendel's Mother is perceived as a threat. Wealhtheow obeys society's distinctions, maintaining her role with hints of threats, while Grendel's Mother pursues action. Beowulf and his men cannot directly challenge Wealhtheow and contain her threats because they are cleverly hidden, but Grendel's Mother's rage is more open. She makes no effort to conceal it and because of it, the men in the poem are not afraid to contain her and set the balance of power right. When Beowulf kills Grendel's Mother it is said that "The flames gleamed, a light glowed within/even as from heaven the firmament's candle/shines clearly" (lines 1570-1572). There is a release of tension as Grendel's Mother is killed, as the balance of society is restored. The lights glow and gleam as all is right in the Anglo-Saxon world. This is perhaps why Grendel's Mother is a clear monster. It is not her grotesque appearance, but her grotesque action. By not conforming to her role as a woman in Anglo-Saxon society, she is a reflection of "cultural anxieties" (Paul Acker, 1993). Therefore, *Beowulf* demonstrates men's attempts to contain those women who cross the lines of their society.

The author emphasizes the power of Wealhtheow's words and then emphasizes the consequences of Grendel's mother's actions. In Wealhtheow's statement to Beowulf, saying "to these boys be/ mild in counsel-I will remember you for that" there is an emphasis on the power behind the Queen's words. She is telling him that she will remember him for his actions and what he does will influence how she weaves her power and connections (lines 1219-1220). However, instead of highlighting Grendel's Mother's power, the consequences and greed behind her actions are what stand out. It says, "But [Grendel's] mother-greedy,/grim-minded-still wanted to go/ on her sad journey to avenge her son's death"(lines 1276-1278). The word "greedy" particularly stands out. As a woman, Grendel's Mother is greedy and selfish in pursuing revenge, demonstrating gender distinctions. Later in the poem, Beowulf and his men see no problem in seeking revenge for a fallen soldier, which is contradictory because why can men seek revenge while women cannot? This is furthermore an example of the emphasis on the consequences of Grendel's Mother's actions. By acting out her rage, she is not bold like Queen Wealhtheow, she is just a monster that needs to be contained.

Queen Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother appear to be opposites, one a peace-weaver and the other a monster, destroying all in her path. The differences depicted between Grendel's Mother and Wealhtheow perhaps make them formidable opponents, or "aeglaeca" or in how the portrayal of feminine roles. (WordSense Dictionary) Wealhtheow uses peace-weaving to her advantage and power, bending society's conditions to her own will. However, while Wealhtheow balances herself along the line of power, Grendel's Mother crosses it for the revenge of her child, making her a monster. They are both two sides of the same coin, Grendel's Mother's rage calling her to action and Wealhtheow's rage calling her to wits and subtle threats. The actions of the women in Beowulf are perhaps a way of showing how women at the time can be powerful

without crossing the line. If women act on their rage, they are labeled “monsters” and contained by men like Grendel’s Mother. However, if they act like Queen Wealhtheow, they can perhaps use their peace-weaving roles to their advantage, acting on their power while still following the rules of society. She tells the men of the hall to “Be gracious to the Geats, mindful of the gifts” reminding them that everything is connected, further emphasizing her words to Beowulf, reminding him that she will not forget what he does, and to watch his actions concerning her and her children. As the queen, Beowulf cannot directly challenge or contain Wealhtheow, therefore her challenge to him holds so much power. Wealhtheow is an example of a woman who knows her place but can just barely push the boundaries of society. It perhaps makes her more powerful than Grendel’s Mother as a force that cannot be controlled, and the emphasis on that highlights the way roles can be carefully challenged in Anglo-Saxon society.

Overall, the poem *Beowulf* contains powerful female characters and demonstrates how feminine power can be properly used without the limits of men in the way. Queen Wealhtheow and Grendel’s mother are the epitome of female rage, their anger being similar but Grendel’s Mother is contained while Wealhtheow utilizes her role to bend that power to her will. The poem is a demonstration of how a woman can be powerful in a society run by men. Grendel’s Mother’s anger was justified, her son was killed, giving her a right to revenge. However, she didn’t act in a way conforming to society, which made her a monster to that society. It is why she was killed by Beowulf and his men, allowing them to restore the balance. Queen Wealhtheow is an example of how women can utilize their roles and avoid the label of “monster”. A woman’s rage can be contained by cultural norms, but that doesn’t stop her from being powerful. *Beowulf* is a transformation story; a story of how a woman’s rage can transform into something she can use to empower herself and bend the will of those around her.

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