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English 311

8 October 2011

On the Limits of Soft Power

The role of woman in most historical portrayals seldom veers dramatically from that of glorified breeding stock. We will find no significant deviation from this norm in the pages of the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf. Perhaps it is due to the brutish nature of the context, but the plight of the fairer sex finds itself in a far more dismal position than in comparable Greek epics written more than a thousand years previous. One instantly thinks of the cleverness of Penelope in Homer's Odyssey, skillfully manipulating the suitors until her rightful husband could return home and slaughter them. To an even greater degree, the instance of Camilla, leader of the Volscians in Virgil's Aeneid springs to mind: who could forget the image of the warrior princess wading into battle, dispensing death on feet that could "outrance the wind?" These women all but eviscerate the sad and pathetic paradigm of the helpless woman found in Beowulf. Perhaps the root of this difference can be found in the presence of Pallas Athena (Minerva) in the Greco-Roman pantheon. To use a highly technical term from the vernacular, Athena was a total badass, and clever to boot. We find no comparable presence of female-as-warrior in the Norse pantheon, or in the Christian tradition which superseded it. The role women seem to be left with conforms closely to that of geomuru ides, or woman-as-victim. A brief survey of several of the estrogenically-challenged characters in Beowulf will further evince this woebegone existence.

Power in the ancient world was won with the sword. It is

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not generally considered a sexist or chauvinistic comment today to state that men generally have superior muscular strength, but rather a physical reality of our species. Modern man is smart enough to recognize that women more than make up for this relative weakness in other areas, but such reasoning was markedly absent in the warrior-males of the northern European world in the first millenia C.E. Taking a superficial view, it would seem that women did little but serve beer and look pretty. When analyzed critically, however, a species of "soft power" does seem to emerge, with women playing the important role of *freoðwebbe*, or "peace-weaver." One example of the combination of soft power and helpless servant can be found in the person of *Wealhtheow*, Hrothgar's queen. For starters, her name seems to translate to "foreign slave," indicating that she was war booty, taken as a prize of battle. It is likely that she was offered as a portion of a peace settlement by the losers of this battle, in an attempt to placate Hrothgar by giving him the right to her womb. This dismal occurrence reminds us that in this time and place, marriage was a contract between two men. What power *Wealhtheow* wields is informal, basically revolving around her ability to maintain the dynastic line. When introduced, *Wealhtheow* is seen to play the role of greeter, welcoming Beowulf's men into Heorot. She pours them mead, a symbolic act denoting friendship, and then goes to sit beside her lord. We do catch some hints of her importance, however, when the poet mentions that she is wisfæst wordum, or "wise in words." Eye-candy has no need for wisdom, so obviously a worthy wife of virtue played some importance in the social context of the day. Later, *Wealhtheow* offers Hrothgar advice pertaining to his treasure-dispensing and she is not backhanded for her insolence, so we see that her opinion did matter to some degree. In matters of succession, such

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royal women often played the role of kingmaker, though it is fully admitted by the poet that when a prince dies, the swords often come out to play, so perhaps this role is not nearly as important as it seems at first. Soft power has its place, but is ultimately trumped by the naked blade of a sword, and so we are left with the inescapable conclusion that the situation is as bad as it looks from afar: women are, by and large, essentially helpless in determining their own destinies at this time and place in history.

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This reality is hammered home in the scop's tale of the enmity between the Danes and the Frisians. Hildeburgh was the daughter of the former Danish king Hoc and sister of the ruling king Hnaet. Acting in the role of *freoðwebbe*, she was married to Finn, king of the Frisians. During a visit by Hnaet, a fight broke out, and Hnaet was killed, as was Hildeburgh's son. Finn was forced to pay homage to the Danes, and Hildeburgh's only say in the matter was to request that that her son and brother be placed on the pyre shoulder to shoulder. The peace didn't last, of course, and Hildeburgh was taken home to the Danes, chattel to the end.

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The only female character in the entire story with actual power isn't actually a woman at all, but a she-monster. Any descriptive treatment we are given of Grendel's mother is purely mythological in nature, but whatever sort of beast she is, she is clearly not human. Vicious in battle, yes, but the poet is only so happy to toss in a misogynistic comment about her prowess, which can be found in section XIX:

The attack was the less terrible by just so much as
is the strength of women, the war-terror of a wife,
less than an armed man's when a hard blade, forge-hammered,

a sword shining with blood, good of its edges, cuts
the stout boar on a helmet opposite.

Mother's fate quickly equates that of her son's, and Beowulf
returns triumphant, the male hero idealized. In the dark days
before true reason was allowed to raise its head, a premium was
placed on physical aggression, and in the pure context of physical
prowess, women were forced into a role of obedience. Unlike in
nearly all of the Greek plays, there is little of redeeming value
or relevance in Beowulf, and perhaps the deplorable role of women
within the tale is a large factor in this reality. It would appear
that the Danes could have used a hefty dose of Medea in order
to right their slanted worldview.

yes!

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