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Rethinking Medieval Literature

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Sexism in *Beowulf*

Beowulf has been thought to have been written around the 10th to 11th century, although no one knows for sure. Due to the timing of the publishing of this heroic tale, it is obvious sexism will be prevalent. Misogyny and sexism are not only present today and in today's writing, but especially during the past as it was found more acceptable to portray women in a frail, insignificant, inferior light and stereotype males as only being "strong heroes."

The definition of sexism according to Stanford University is, "discrimination or prejudice based on gender or sex, typically against women." The important thing to keep in mind about this definition is that sexism is typically against women, but can also happen to men. The main sexism occurring to men in *Beowulf*. Beowulf himself says "I was the strongest swimmer of all" (Heaney 534), placing value on physical skills instead of intellect and peace making. When it seems as if a fate has been met, it is even mentioned that, "And if death does take me, send the hammered mail of my armor to Higlac, return the inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he from Wayland." showing that in the possible last moments of a man's life what is supposed to be on his mind is armor and money; tangible things not loved ones.

Not only does this tale not have many female characters, but there is no female dialogue in *Beowulf* that is not directed to a male or about a male. Grendel's mother, a fierce, protective character, who has so much fight in her heart, is even said to be weaker than Grendel... only because she is not male. Grendel's mother fighting in the name of her son is considered to be

evil when in reality, she is simply a female who is mourning the loss of her spawn. Females who stood up for themselves were automatically seen to be evil. A quote showing the pain that was put into Grendel's mother's heart was when it was stated, "The fierce woman Took toll for her child, she daringly killed in blindness." They viewed her as a threat in more ways than one; not only to their lives, but to their *way* of life. She was a powerful female and that was unheard of. When females begin to revolt it's dangerous as it's a change.

Women in general were all portrayed to be lower than men. Peacemaking is a skill typically found within female characters and real-life females when it comes to stereotyping. For example, Wealhtheow plays peacemaker when greeting Beowulf and his entourage, serving as a drink server, and making sure all relations are diplomatic from a distance. A quote that depicts how women in *Beowulf* were preferred to be seen and not heard is, "Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies. Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted the men in hall." Hrothgar's queen was decorated in gold to look beautiful, as women were meant to be, only observed, and simply saluted. She was not permitted to sit down and have a drink with the boys or talk battle strategies, because during that period it would be outlandish for a lady to speak out in that manner. She was meant to know her place and serve. Although this may be a hero's tale it's important to consider for who? Certainly not for women displaying blatant misogyny towards them, not towards men showing the only way to be strong is through killing, and not for Grendel's poor mother.

The other women mentioned through Fitt 23 aren't given individual names, but are referred to by titles, such as "Grendel's *mother*," "Onela's *queen*," and "Ecgtheow's *wife*." This lack of individualization forces the audience to associate these characters through their relationship with the *male* closest to them in their lives, rather than letting them be their own person. It is similar to how fathers "give" their daughters away during weddings; it makes

females seem as though they are a piece of property rather than a person. Referring to these ladies by a title rather than a name limits them to what they can do rather than who they can be.

Although no one knows who wrote the original Beowulf, it is irrelevant when it comes to considering if it has sexist elements, as it was a common unsaid agreement during the time period the tale was written that males were stereotyped as strong heroes. Females were stereotyped as damsels in distress and quite frequently sex objects. Beowulf was simply a template of the Anglo-Saxon society (without the mythical creatures depending on your beliefs). With some new translations of Beowulf, you can see more attention toward females which shows progress in today's society, but even outside of literature, there's still a long way to go. From politicians saying statements like "grab her by the p*ssy," boys developing unhealthy gym relationships to conform to the "standard" of male "macho", to sexual assaults being claimed to be women's faults due to revealing clothing, sexism is running rampant around us. Is there a way to fix this sexism in literature and society? Possibly, but it will take years of relearning century-old behaviors from hero tales like this one.

Sources

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