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The role of women in *Beowulf* and *Lanval*

The representation and attitudes towards women in medieval literature changed drastically between *Beowulf* and *Lanval*. These views of women and the changing of them are also marked by extensive changes between the overall cultures both works depict. The positive portrayal of women like Queen Wealhtheow and the warrior culture that ruled the Norman society saw a sharp decline when compared to the weaker Arthurian culture and the women Marie de France displays in *Lanval*. **In early medieval literature like *Beowulf*, women serve a positive role like maintaining peace and offering beneficial advice; though in later medieval literature, like *Lanval*, the independent, leadership roles of women combats negative depictions like oversexualization and manipulative behavior.**

In *Beowulf* women occupy the role of cup-passers and peace-weavers which make them important and highly regarded members of the Norman culture. Though women do not have a very notable role in the overall plot of *Beowulf*, the women who do appear in the text serve the purpose of portraying the role of women in early medieval society. The most significant of the women in *Beowulf* is Queen Wealhtheow. Wealhtheow is the ideal woman too early medieval society. She begins the cup-passing ceremony during the first celebration at Heorot as she says, “Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord; raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats duly and gently, discourse with them, be open-handed, happy, and fond,” (Beowulf 1168-1171). As the queen begins the

ceremony, she also leads the other women to do the same. During this ceremony, Queen Wealhtheow is also weaving peace between the boastful and prideful men around her. She takes care to tell them to speak to each other gently and without malicious in order to maintain the familial and appreciative warrior culture that is key for the Normans. While she does this and leads the other women into doing the same, the queen is being listened to by her male counterparts. Not only is she respected and listened to when she essentially commands for peace amongst all the men in Heorot, but her words are also held to a high regard when she speaks directly to Beowulf and weaves peace between him and her sons. She says, "Treat my sons with tender care, be strong and kind. Here each comrade is true to the other, loyal to lord, loving in spirit" (Beowulf 1226-1229). Wealhtheow weaves peace between everyone around her. She shows that women during the early medieval period had to be careful, calculated, and thoughtful because their words and actions ensured either the success or failure of their community. In *Beowulf*, women serve the role of being attentive and diligent members of the Norman culture who brought peace to the men around them. Though, this role changes with Arthurian literature.

Lanval, the positive representation of women changes, as they struggle to maintain the independent role they have in *Beowulf* while also serving the role as seducers and deceivers. While there is a strong, independent female figure shown in the Lady in *Lanval*, there are also several moments in the text where Marie features the oversexualization of women which too her was prominent in Camelot and Arthurian society. In majority of the scenes that introduce both major and minor female characters, Marie takes care to focus on their appearance first before anything else. For example, two maidens ride into Camelot during Lanval's hearing, Marie describes them as "two damsels riding on two lovely palfreys [...] the girls were wonderfully fair! Rich purple taffeta they wore next to the skin, and nothing more," (Marie 472-476). The women who appear in *Lanval*

are almost always described as to wearing minimal clothing. Marie includes this oversexualization because it is the first impression majority of the men in Camelot note. In the example, Marie writes the depiction based on the attitudes of the knights who see them as she includes “the knights looked on delightedly!” (Marie 477). The inclusion of these sexual descriptions shows that part of the role in the Arthurian society of *Lanval* is to be alluring seductresses. The other role women serve in *Lanval* is to be manipulators. This exploitation which is used primarily against men is seen in both Queen Genevieve’s relationship with King Arthur and in the Lady’s relationship with Lanval. In the case of Queen Genevieve, she uses her influence both as queen and as Arthur’s wife to deceive him. After she attempts and fails to seduce Lanval, the queen feels “shamed” (Marie 306) and to save herself from this shame she lies to her husband telling him that she was “dishonored” by Lanval (Marie 316). Queen Genevieve essentially lies to Arthur who blindly follows her will. Selfishly, the queen misleads the king which Marie uses to show women filling the role of devious dangers to men. On the other hand, while the Lady is manipulative and controlling over Lanval, she showcases a more superior and independent role. She represents a heroic role. Throughout the text, Marie has her take immediate control over her relationship with Lanval, the Lady sets the rules and when Lanval eventually breaks them she maintains the punishment she had dictated for him. However, it is also the Lady who rides in during Lanval’s hearing and saves him from the wrath of Arthur. She says, “[...] the queen was wrong; it was not so, [Lanval] he never sought her love at all!” (Marie 620-621). In *Lanval*, Marie shows women filling multiple roles that all seem to both counter and build off one another. In the Arthurian society Marie presents, women all have the role of being scheming seductress, while also being individualistic saviors.

Moreover, both works portray intriguing character dynamics between their female characters. The similarities and differences between Queen Wealhtheow and Grendel’s mother and

between the Lady and Queen Genevieve also allude to the role women have in both the literature and in medieval society. Because both works include women who oppose each other very distinctly, one could argue that they too represent the role women are supposed to fill.

Firstly, when looking at Grendel's mother she is not the typically representation of an early medieval woman. She is a monster and a descendant on Cain. She is unwomanly as she is described to be horrid in both appearance and nature. She also takes matters into her own hands; she seeks revenge and the blood of those who killed her son. One could very much argue that her inclusion in *Beowulf* is supposed to depict another representation or role of women; however, that would be incorrect. While Grendel's mother shares a character dynamic with Queen Wealhtheow, there is little to any similarities between these two women because they are meant to distinctly oppose one another. Wealhtheow represents the how women in early medieval society are intended to be physically, mentally, and socially. Grendel's mother is a misleading depiction because there is no other woman who behaves the way she does in the entirety of the work. Where Wealhtheow is described as a peacekeeper, Grendel's mother is described as "[...] grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (Beowulf 1278) and she is seen as a "[...] force for evil driven to avenge her kinsman's death" (Beowulf 1339-1340). In both *Beowulf* and early medieval society, women are not meant to be vengeful, like Wealhtheow, they are meant to bring calm, peace, and thoughtfulness to their people which is everything Grendel's mother lacks. She is not even seen as a woman, it just says, "... as far as anyone ever can discern looks like a woman" (Beowulf 1350-1351). Not only does Grendel's mother possess no womanly qualities she is hardly even considered a woman, so when examining what she does for the role of woman she is meant to show everything a woman is not.

Similarly, further analysis into the dynamic between Queen Genevieve and the Lady in *Lanval* can one to question the roles Marie presents. *Lanval* shows women as being independent, self-sufficient while also being manipulative and tempting. The Lady shows the most self-sufficiency, however, she is a completely oppose with Queen Genevieve; the two share many similarities which can conflict with her independent persona. For example, like all the other women presented, the Lady and Queen Genevieve are both oversexualized. When Lanval finds the Lady, she is improperly dressed as “[...] her chemise [is] all she wore) (Marie 99). Also “her side [...] [is] revealed and bare,” (Marie 104) as well are her “face neck and breast [...] (Marie 105). The queen is oversexualized when she approaches Lanval and tells him, “ [...] you may possess my love entire! Speak to me! Tell me your desire! Freely I give you druerie; you must rejoice in taking me!” (Maire 264-267). This similarity in sexualization of women can easily take away from the independent nature of the lady, also like Genevieve is with the King, she manipulates and controls Lanval. Though despite these characteristics, the Lady is savior at the end of the story which is somethings Genevieve never does. Marie has the Lady ride in, reveal the truth, and steal Lanval away. Though she her oversexualization and controlling natures makes her like the queen and other women in Camelot, she is not truly similar to them.

Thus, *Beowulf* and *Lanval* feature female characters like Queen Wealhtheow and the Lady, and even Grendel’s mother and Queen Genevieve present the multiple roles of women throughout the medieval period. Queen Wealhtheow shows women as being peace-weavers, while the Lady shows them as being independent and along with Queen Genevieve shows that woman also fill the role of temptresses and manipulators. While Grendel’s mother depicts everything a woman is not. Though Queen Wealhtheow and Grendel’s mother share an interesting dynamic in *Beowulf*, Wealhtheow opposes the hateful nature Grendel’s mother represents. Additionally, although Marie

treats the Lady similarly to the other women in *Lanval*, in terms of her being oversexualized and controlling, she sets the Lady apart by having her be a self-sufficient rescuer.