

British literature with 3 choices for the topic



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Portrayal of 'Otherness' in Beowulf and The Wife of Baths Tale Though

Beowulf was generally believed to be a Norse myth, modern scholars now, notably Klaeber and Walsh, opine that Beowulf is a Christian allegory with an Anglo Saxon author. As Gerald Walsh noted in his book *Medieval Humanism*, "Beowulf is... the creation of a Christian, possibly of a monk... By the eighth century, these legends had become... welded together into a single allegorical song imitating the Divine Mystery of Redemption -- a conception beyond the scope of the Vikings power." (45)

This epic poem serves to emphasize the contrast between nature and culture. The natural world becomes, strangely, an unnatural and supernatural one inhabited by monsters. The terror of the unknown is common not just to the Norsemen, but to all men, and the intangible menace invoked by the supernatural reaches out of the text and grips the reader as well. Society in Beowulf has its core in the hall, not unsurprisingly called 'Heorot', meaning 'heart'. The hall is surrounded by the hunter-gatherer village structure of women and huts, representing the outer periphery of society. Beyond lay the unknown - swamps and wilderness denoting the other, outer world where Grendel lives, unable to access Heorot and the social affection and bonding within. He can only watch from afar.

The 'Loathly Lady' is a common motif found in literature extending back to Celtic and German mythology and Arthurian legend. The lady is portrayed as an ugly old hag a young and handsome knight has to consummate marriage with. When the deed is done, the crone is transformed into a beautiful, youthful maiden, who informs her husband that he can choose her to be beautiful and false or ugly and true. By letting his new wife make the decision herself, the knight frees her from the spell, and she is now fair and

faithful. In the Irish tradition, the loathly lady has been thought to personify the sovereignty of the land, the parallel being that whoever submits to the prophetic kingmaker and her wishes will become the ruler of the land.

The 'lady' is shown as different from the norm, both in the magical forms that she takes, as well as her behavior. Both Alysoun, in the prologue to The Wife of Bath's Tale from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, as well as Dame Ragnelle in the tale itself, go against the accepted norms of society. Alysoun is much married and holds forth views on virginity, for instance, contrary to the established mores of the time. Ragnelle's rude manners at the feast scandalize all, but must be accepted as she is now wed to a knight. As Professor Marion Wynne-Davies states in her feminist commentary in *The Tales of The Clerk and The Wife of Bath*: "Women are presented as the excluded opposites of masculine identity; they are what men are not... By... personifying this otherness, women can remind men of what constitutes male subjectivity..." (142)

Ironically, in killing Grendel, who represents the primitive forces of nature, the hero Beowulf exhibits similar qualities of unbridled passion as well as solitude - the lone warrior protecting society with an almost pathological need to torment and kill Grendel. Thus some of these negative forces outside civilization also reside in the hero but these are valued by society because they are useful. In the 'Loathly Lady' motif, though, the theme of nonconformity to established societal expectations aims to emphasize that men should recognize the 'otherness' and, by implication, the individuality and sovereignty of women. In both works, however, this 'otherness' serves to contrast starkly what is accepted with what is not, thus helping define the respective cultures and the ideals held dear in each.

Works Cited

Walsh, Gerald Groveland. *Medieval Humanism*. The Macmillan Company.

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Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Tales of The Clerk and The Wife of Bath*. Marion

Wynne-Davies (ed). UK. Routledge. 2002.