

PRE-FEUDAL WOMEN

BY JANET T. BUCK

Dr. Buck is an assistant professor in the Douglass College
English Department

THIS discussion is based on a study of *Beowulf* begun in 1958, on which I submitted a paper to Yale University for a doctorate received in 1960,¹ and which is now undergoing final revision. In it I view the strong yet beleaguered emotion accompanying the social bond of the old warrior-lord societies of North Europe as an attitude, or "dominant emotion," which pervades the poem with a terrific clarity thus imperishably defining itself verbally. When I began the study I knew it was a good idea for me, a woman and therefore a person thought to be ignorant of the warrior-lord bond, to investigate *Beowulf* and the scholarly literature around it and to write a criticism of the poem from my special point of view.

Soon after 1960 I discovered in an old work of René Wellek a rationale for my approach which partly reassured me about its potential usefulness to others. Though I wrote formal criticism, my work subserved an intense scrutiny of the structures in the poem expressive of a "dominant emotion," and this scrutiny was something other than formal criticism. I now saw my work was at least partly what Wellek in a 1941 article had named "history of sentiment."² He characterized that branch of knowledge as a difficult and challenging one, since sentiment had "hardly any history" and history of sentiment could show "not only man's concept but his attitude and feeling for death or love." Wellek's definitions strengthened my stubborn wish to finish my critique of *Beowulf* in the exact mode in which I had begun it.

In the next years certain works of criticism appeared which decisively assisted my project in that they gave it a genre and revealed it had something to tell readers of the 1970's. These works, excep-

¹ Janet Buck, "Aspects of the Thematic Organization of *Beowulf*," Diss. Yale 1960, which incorporates views from a 1925 article on *Beowulf* by Albert S. Cook (1853-1927), Rutgers 1872. Another *Beowulf* article by Cook, "The Possible Begetter of the Old English *Beowulf* and *Widsith*," has been so widely useful as to have been recently reprinted. His concordances, one to Thomas Gray and one to *Beowulf*, are in Rutgers Main Library, the former already preserved in the Rutgersensia collection.

² René Wellek, "Literary Scholarship," *American Scholarship in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Merle Curti (1953; rpt. New York, 1967), p. 135.

tionally fine in their own right, are Sarah N. Lawall's *Critics of Consciousness* (1968), J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality* (1965) as illumined by Lawall's study of his technique, and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970).³ With the first two of these in hand my own work on *Beowulf* can be seen to be formal criticism integrally combined with criticism of consciousness: in my critique, the awareness of reality depicted by the *Beowulf* poetry is shown to combine emotion about kindred with emotion about military group and emotion about money or treasure; and by this same consciousness the high human attractiveness yet inherent destructiveness and self-destructiveness of that combination of emotions is revealed. Furthermore, concerning the third of the works just named, since I studied the *Beowulf* poet's vision of a warrior-lord bond entered by men in these societies and not by women, my findings can take part in the current discussion between Kate Millett and Lionel Tiger.⁴ Millett says men suppress women, but Tiger answers that the alliances or "bonding" which men enter and women do not are ordained by nature. My study does indeed show such a bond integral to the immemorial and revered "associative principle" of pre-feudal society. In that society, men typically are heroic and women, as typically, are tragic or pathetic and have a slightly different emotional make-up from men. My conclusions in this matter, with an *obiter dictum* or two, are the subject of this present paper. My findings appear to support Tiger and yet also to support Millett in a manner that will now be explained.

Certainly there are sweeping preliminary questions that can legitimately be asked about the relevance to today, if any, of observations of women made in a study of the human associative principle seen in *Beowulf*. The only sweeping answer I know is that among those who choose to study heroic literature, whether the *Odyssey* or *Chanson de Roland* or *Beowulf*, there is a feeling that counterparts of ancient heroic folkways survive powerfully and disturbingly in the most modern of us. The book of one such scholar was re-named *Founders of England*,⁵ with the phrase perhaps well conveying the sense in author and readers of a living applicability in the early medi-

³ Sarah N. Lawall, *Critics of Consciousness* (Cambridge, 1968); J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, 1965); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, 1970).

⁴ Lionel Tiger, "Male Dominance? Yes, Alas. A Sexist Plot? No," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1970, pp. 35-37, 124-27, 132, 134, 136.

⁵ The book is Francis B. Gummere's, 2d rev. ed., ed. Francis P. Magoun, Jr. (New York, 1930). The original 1891 title had been *Germanic Origins, a Study in Primitive Culture*.

eval data presented. Putting sweeping answers aside, one preliminary question that offers illuminating specific answers is this: granted the tragic or pathetic social insufficiency observable in princesses and queens in these early societies, was it also true of women who were ordinary people? The answer is yes, for reasons now to be considered.

Early medieval society, pre-legal, made no emotional difference between public and private ties. War was a way of life. The warrior-lord bond (public) was as intimate as the brother-brother bond. As J.E.A. Jolliffe puts it, a pre-feudal (and pre-legal) polity was but "the application upon a grand scale of . . . rules of personal association," and "the distinction which we are used to drawing between public and private institutions was as yet not conceived of."⁶ Among the women whom I have observed is a daughter astutely dispatched as "peace-weaver" by marrying her to a man of a neighboring nation, but being actually a "foreign-captive" there, with reciprocally annihilating loyalties toward brother-father on the one hand and toward husband-son on the other, especially when war breaks out between the two nations. But since the individual kindreds are small, self-contained (non-clan) households, and since there is no emotional difference between public (nation-level) and private (household-level) responses, this same status of peace-weaver as foreign-captive would be true of any daughter of a household sent out into another household. The daughter has the intense and feud-prone kin-loyalty that she was taught by both parents to urge on self and siblings, loyalty to one another and their father. But then she is shipped out into another kindred (her new "nation") and commanded to have a relationship with her husband somehow overriding his to his own siblings, parents, and associated fellow-warriors (his familial but also extrafamilial nation), when all she has to apply to this task is her bond with her own "nation," which is solely a kindred group. In her time as in ours often, the sex relation is asked to carry a load of responsibility and accountability it cannot bear.

Now it is true her brother, reared as a warrior, learns first to bond intensely with siblings and parents as she does; but then later he bonds in the same intensity with his extrafamilial fellow-warrior and his first battle-lord. Then effortlessly, still later, he can bond with

⁶ John E. A. Jolliffe, *The Constitutional History of Medieval England from the English Settlement to 1485*, 4th ed. (New York, 1961), p. 23.

a new fellow-warrior and new battle-lord, and sometimes battle-lord Two opposes battle-lord One. As can be seen in Beowulf himself, with battle-lord One (Hygelac) there is, perhaps typically, the greatest bond of all, more than father and more than subsequent battle-lords, yet by an able warrior this beloved lord's faction can be departed from without personal tragedy. And in a warrior, this sequence from kindred to ever larger selections of extrafamilial "friends" retains its pristine vigor because kindred ties remain very strong and very militant. (This pre-feudal associative principle lost its public influentialness as soon as familial blood-feud, vendetta, was outlawed by statute.)

But the sister never progresses out from brother-and-father to extrafamilial fellow-warrior and first battle-lord. She knows—hears—enough about the warrior-lord customs and their sanctions to understand that these make the decisions that form the group she is in, and create its actions that affect her fate. She urges and praises the warrior-lord customs and sanctions, but she gets no chance to practice them. Instead she goes from brother and father to *burh-locas*, or castle enclosure, of another man. Here she does not participate in an egalitarian way in the group's instrumental decisions, which are who is to fight whom and what armor shall be used where; nor does she participate in the group's instrumental activity such as looting and establishing new political borders. Therefore her new custodian is not her extrafamilial battle-lord, and she is not fellow-warrior with her new custodian's warriors or with him. Worse, she now bears a son who is. She is left with her original love for brother-father, this intense love nurtured in sufficiently complete ideas of egalitarian and instrumental loyalty—citizenship—to have made her a fit teacher and encourager of her own brothers who were to go out from the kindred and become fellow-warriors; and now, of her son.

But she herself has no egalitarian or instrumental practice opportunities. She can do nothing against any foe except be carried away or killed—which is really all she can do with any friend. Her new life in *burh-locas* (home enclosure) contradicts her human promise. Everything hurts. Other women are in the same betrayed state. All the men pursue decision-making, friendship, wars—that is, citizenship. The women are left urging this system but excluded from practicing it, with their loyalties pulled in half, and with shamed hatred of one another's ineffectualness. Worst of all, when war breaks out

between a woman's husband-son group and her father-brother group, the latter group does not really want her loyalty though she has it for them: as with Hengest in the Finn episode of *Beowulf*⁷ (where the lady Hildeburh is queen to Finn but sister to Hnaef, and Finn and Hnaef are at war), the faction of the lady's brother know in their hearts that to take the lady "home" where she came from will only cause more war. Such is the "peace-weaving" done by the "foreign-captive."

This very bad position for woman, I would conclude and comment to Lionel Tiger, probably does result from people's following those fierce natural paths indicated by the form of human bonding nature itself ordains, just as Tiger suggests when he maintains "that there are biological bases for sexual differences which have nothing to do with oppressing females but rather with ensuring the safety of communities and the healthy growth of children."⁸

Here I would have to side with John Stuart Mill no matter what the actual situation was, and conclude with Mill in his deeply-felt (posthumous) essay, "Nature," that "we ought not to consider at all what nature does, but what it is good to do." Mill had observed, as all people must, that nature ordains terrible things: not only war, but terrible calamity and terrible diseases. Again with Mill, I would certainly decide that "conformity to nature, has no connection whatever with right and wrong."⁹ These observations and conclusions would be mine no matter what the actual world situation was. But the actual world situation now is that *burh-loca*, the home enclosure, is no longer able to protect anyone's body or property—any man's, any woman's, or any child's. Therefore there is no further need for the cultural situation outlined in the foregoing pages and called natural by Tiger.

Instead, there probably ought to be early intense family friendship, passing in both men and women to extra-familial friendship, and prevented in both cases from being a solidity *against persons*. Early medieval *freoðo*, the familial—and, transferred in all its intensity, the fellow-warriors'—ongoing and wordless "peace," was inherently a solidity against foes: a defensive, touchy, protective,

⁷ See *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber (Boston, 1950), lines 1151 b - 1159 a, p. 44.

⁸ Tiger, p. 35.

⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Nature, The Utility of Religion, and Theism* (London, 1874, republished 1969), pp. 31, 62.

thing, subduing great potential violence and holding that violence on instant call and available in the form of threats and taunts. Whether *freoðo* could remain a solidity at all if it lost its derivation from violence is a question to which I have no answer to offer readers. My own answer is somewhat negative, though I think the old bond can socially mutate to a better one. My theories here are not relevant, however, to my foregoing explanation of the early medieval situation, and have not influenced it: it was done in the dark, so to speak, in that it adheres to observed facts about the awareness of social forces that can be perceived in the poem *Beowulf*.

In conclusion, the early medieval North European rearing produced a wonderful "breed" of warriors and fellow-warriors, with attractively tragic and pathetic women in the *burh-loca* of all their backgrounds. Their form of social bonding can, I feel, be relied on only to produce more of the same, hence is not appropriate at present to our society.