

### *32. Briefly on Feminism*

There were those essays I wrote where I grappled with feminism in one way or another. I wanted to squarely confront it and show at the same time that I could wrestle it to the ground. The figure of wrestling is apt because the intellectual or ideological side of me was never far from the fantasy of raping or being raped. Oh, to think that power and sex can be distinguished so easily! Not only was every living fibre of me proof to the contrary but there was every living Helen with her power to draw a thousand looks! Viewed by me as a great propagandistic lie, I detested the feminist line on power. I didn't believe that the latest squabbles between men and women and the re-righting of old wrongs justified it. And when I went about the business of studying feminism and feminist critique, it was less with the desire to identify with people fighting for an equal playing field than to know the enemy.

*- Of course I know the essays he's talking about. They're not so sensational as all that. In fact, it's all quite misleading because he never wrote specifically on feminism. It was mostly stuff that came out when he was examining the feminist critiques of works like Paradise Lost, Beowulf, and The Battle of Maldon.*

*- We're committed to telling the truth here.*

*- Alright, the one on The Battle of Maldon got a bit out of hand. The professor reprimanded him for being too harsh and cutting.*

*(Professor Izydorczyk: Although sympathetic to your main argument, I think the tone of your paper is not entirely appropriate.)*

*He was criticizing the critic, Heather Stuart, because she herself was criticizing the heroic ideal in The Battle of Maldon and making it out to be the cause of wars and suffering.*

*- Didn't she have a point?*

*- Well, maybe a little one but she pumped it up so much she was ready to turn the usual interpretation of the poem upside down.*

*- But one might say she had courage to do what she did. In fact, one might say she acted heroically.*

- *That's a point he raised with himself later.*
- *And probably thinking he was also scoring a point for himself. After all, it's a way to complicate heroism. On the other hand, she was focussing on one end of it. The business of going to war and killing people.*
- *So maybe she had in mind something else.*
- *Yes, the warrior ideal. But then it seems to me this ideal would either have to be understood as limited to the battlefield or else the heroic ideal kept out of all human conflict. After all, if it were allowed to assert itself in some part of it, why exclude it from others?*
- *It would have to be applied only to things like saving people. Then everybody's on board about who's a hero and who's not. But when it comes to killing them, it's always split between those who see a glorious battle and those who see the most horrible crimes.*
- *It seems to me if the heroic is to be held responsible for wars and suffering, it must be eliminated not only on the battlefield but in the boardroom.*

Mixing sexuality with sexual politics even got into my interpretation of *Beowulf*.

*"The *aglaewif*, fighting in her own element, becomes a far greater threat to Beowulf than her son ever was. Greater physical strength no longer is the deciding factor in battle and, as a glorified male attribute, becomes a thing of mockery for the warrior woman who is willing to exploit every advantage. The equalization of the contest between them results in a prolonged see-saw battle fought at close quarters. There is the tussling for a dominant or favourable position, the *aglaewif* finally sitting on the hero and trying to penetrate his armour first with her fingers and then with her knife."*

- *His thesis was that there's a dialectic in Beowulf between one type of woman and another. A kind like me, say, for instance, and a monster-type. And the monster-type is outside nature and society which of course means male-dominated society and so is very fearful and even emasculating.*

I must confess I did get a fright when I heard it suggested in class that most anonymous writings of the past were written by women. Or that men had

created a patriarchal god in order to put down the threat that the opposite sex posed to them. Or that male authors were guilty of sexism every time they depicted an unflattering female character or let some male character give vent to his misogynist feelings. No doubt my reaction was a typically neurotic one that sprang from largely unexamined assumptions about male superiority. At the same time I was acutely aware that correcting past injustices was not the same as being just. If ever I was one who could have been labelled a misogynist, it was at least partly for the reason that I resented being so labelled and the all too quick use of labels in general.

*– It seems to me the phenomenon of feminism in the university cannot be treated so lightly without stifling one of the important voices that should be brought in here.*

*– That poses a problem for me because I can't be that voice or take on a way of thinking that, though it may suit some, would not suit me.*

*– Of course you're cut from a different cloth. But I was wondering why he hadn't got someone to take on the role.*

*– I suppose I could do it in a pinch.*

*– No, no, no! What is needed is a genuine voice. Not a caricature.*

*– How would such a voice sound? Would it chide him for taking up the subject as he does? For letting it be fuelled by an all-too-masculine and even hyper-masculine identity? Would it denounce him for not turning his project into a self-condemnation, an admission of its being grounded in a long tradition of wrongdoing?*

*– That's the way most of us are made to feel.*

*– The collective guilt thing?*

*– Why shouldn't it be admitted as true?*

*– Who is denying that truth and who is and on what authority demanding it to be the whole truth?*

*– The masculinists on one side and the feminists on the other.*

*– And to be neither I think is to find the whole of it a caricature of the*

*struggle between the sexes because it's the mere politics or policy of stigmatising the opposing party while viewing — I'm sorry, I do tend to go on.*

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