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Memory as a Tool vs. Weapon in *Beowulf* and *Yonec*

Within the medieval texts, *Beowulf* and *The Lais of Marie de France*, the poems use memory as a tool to create inspiration, influence, and deception. In *Beowulf*, memory is used to form inspiration through the legacy of first, Scyld Scefing, and later Beowulf. The recounting of their brave feats and physical wealth is key to the use of heroic storytelling which emphasizes their greatness as rulers. Likewise, within the *lais Yonec*, the memory of the great knight, Muldumarec, is used to influence the revenge Yonec must take on his evil step-father. Contrastingly, memory, or lack thereof, is also used within this *lais* as a method of deception and violence when the Lord of Caerwent is not able to remember his Lady's misdeeds. A crucial theme within these texts is understanding the significance of the role memory plays in medieval court and how it reflects bravery, wealth, and respect amongst the characters. Access to memory is central within both texts, as those who are considered "good" elicit positive memories from courtly society, while those deemed as "bad" are withheld from the advantage of memory.

The concept of memory is used at the beginning of *Beowulf* in order to portray Scyld Scefing as an ideal leader. The author of the poem included the prologue of a time many years before Beowulf in order to set a precedent for great leadership, bravery, and wealth. The first two lines echo "We have heard of the glory in bygone days / of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes (*Beowulf*, lines 1-2, p. 55)." These lines emphasize the importance of memory and how it is sustained through oral tellings, hence the word "heard." It is key to the plot that the author

presents a time of peace and prosperity under Scefing's rule because it gives a model to what medieval times considered to be a strong leader. He is a figure that Beowulf can base his own success on, showing how memory can be used as a tool of inspiration to motivate later generations of rulers towards achievement. Beowulf's access to the memory of Scefing also gives him the advantage of knowing stoic and brave leadership. Without memory, there would be no mention of Scefing within the text, due to it being a reference to a past time. Similarly, a key element of memory lies in the physical objects which great leaders are buried with, symbolizing all of their victories in life.

Scyld Scefing, Beowulf, and Muldermac are all considered excellent leaders and their grave sites, though each different, reflect the impact they had on their respective communities. Scefing was described as being sent off to sea, the author saying "I have never heard of a more lovely ship / bedecked with battle-weapons and war-gear (*Beowulf*, 38-39, p. 57)." Though they never knew where or who received the ship, it is implied through his grandiose ceremony of death that the memory of Scefing's achievements is still alive and well. His grave is full of battle-weapons and war-gear as a representation of his violence, which allowed him to win battles and maintain his kingdom. Beowulf, similarly, had a great rule in which he details how he maintained his land without fault and slayed great beasts. He is remembered on a monument called "Beowulf's Barrow" which sits on a cliff overlooking the sea. The author describes his pyre as being "Hung with battle-shields and helmets / and bright byrnies, as he had bidden (*Beowulf*, lines 3139-3140, p. 243)." Beowulf's memorial was purposely put on the cliff where those passing by could see it and remember his great leadership. It has similar symbols to Scefing, demonstrating their likeness as rulers. The description of these memorials emphasizes the access to memory which was apparent during the medieval times. Their dedications are very

intentional in the way that they commemorate their golden wealth and brave violence through the swords and riches buried within them. Within the *lais*, *Yonec*, Muldermarac is similarly commemorated in death as he lies in “a great tomb / covered with silken cloth with circles / or rich golden embroidery from end to end (*Yonec*, lines 496-498, p.).” His people not only decorated his grave with explicit care, but it was put on display, which further keeps his memory alive. These three central figures ultimately represent memory as a tool to inspire leadership and elicit sympathy.

Furthermore, Muldermarac, the knight who is able to transform into a hawk, is murdered by his lover’s husband and is mourned throughout his land. He has similar social status of Scefing and Beowulf as Marie recounts “The people began to weep / and, weeping, to recount / that he was the best knight / and the strongest and the boldest, / the most beautiful, the most beloved / who would ever be born in the world (*Yonec*, lines 509-514, p.237).” Their reaction to thinking about his death again reasserts the power of memory. Though dead, Muldermarac still holds the power of being remembered within society due to his success, which reveals itself to be key in enacting his vengeance on the Lord of Caerwent. Without the memory of his greatness lasting among his people, the woman talking to the Lady of Caerwent and Yonec would never have expressed that “Rather we have waited many days / for a son he fathered upon the lady (*Yonec*, lines 519-520, p. 239).” The woman’s remembrance here is indicative of a greater pattern with society. This passage reveals how memory is essential to achieving influence, which in this case manifests itself as vengeance. Both of these examples from the texts reveal the way in which access to memory can create power through inspiration and influence. However, the poems also contrast one another as *The Lais of Marie de France* uses memory again in a contrasting manner.

Still within the story *Yonec*, memory is used in a contrasting method, revealing the way that lack of access to memory can create destruction and violence. A key element of the plot is when the Lady of Caerwent follows Muldermarac back to his home after he is dying from the attack. Muldermarac tells her to leave so she is not blamed for his death, however, she fears if she returns her husband will kill her for her misdeeds. To solve this issue, “He gave her a little ring, / and told her and instructed her / that never, so long as she keeps it, / will her lord ever remember / anything that was done, / nor will he keep her confined (*Yonec*, lines 413-418, p. 233).” In this passage, memory is no longer being used to create inspiration, but rather to enact deception. The ring is used as a tool of violence because the Lord is no longer privy to the information that the rest of the characters within the story have. The Lord is not able to remember his wife’s affair or his attack on Muldermarac, which leads him to raise Yonec as his own son. His forced forgetfulness ultimately leaves the Lord completely defenseless and naive to the vengeance Yonec will take on him when he learns the truth of his parentage. This use of memory reveals the importance of who has access and control over memory. It is representative of the idea that memory can be used as both a tool to gain power, as well as a weapon against those who do not have access to it. Furthermore, the ring which Muldermarec gives his lover is an object which symbolizes the power of memory across genders, as well as the exchange of memory between people and objects.

The exchange of the ring within this story has a particular impact because rings are a common motif used in *The Lais of Marie de France* to represent admiration or loyalty between heterosexual couples. However, in this case, the ring does not just symbolize loyalty between Muldermarac and his lover, but also symbolizes the weaponization of memory against the Lord of Caerwent. It is simultaneously a token of love, as well as a weapon of deception. The ring also

operates as a way for memory to cross genders in a way that is not shown in other medieval texts, such as *Beowulf*. The remembrance of great leaders seems to be completely masculine, as only prominent men, like Scefing, Beowulf, and Muldermarec, are remembered for their bravery. *Yonec* is one of the only *lais* where a man transfers the power of controlling memory to a woman, who is able to save herself from death and enact revenge on her evil husband. The exchange of the ring shows the significance of gender in the concept of memory, demonstrating yet another way that these medieval poems portray access to memory.

The texts *Beowulf* and *The Lais of Marie de France*, though different in many ways, both connect on the vital importance of access to memory. The valiant characters appear to hold the memory of their peoples, which in turn aids their reputation and legacy, while the evil characters are prohibited access to memory, which ultimately becomes their downfall. The gravesites of the valiant rulers and the ring being exchanged between lovers are objects which represent the inspiration and deception that can stem from manipulation of memory. Within these texts, memory is used as a weapon of sorts, and it is used differently depending on who wields it.

Works Cited

Beowulf: Facing-Page Translation, ed. and trans. R.M. Liuzza, 2nd edition (Broadview, 2013).

Yonec: The Lais of Marie de France, ed. and trans. Claire Waters (Broadview, 2018).