

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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Trump Meets Beowulf

This is not a trick question: “What does Donald Trump share with *Beowulf*?”

The answer is “more than you might think, but not enough,” none of which is particularly flattering to *Der Trumpster*.

As we said last week in [Book Notes](#), in revisiting Seamus Heaney’s magnificent translation of *Beowulf* one discovers one thing and rediscovers several others.

The discovery is that the almost unreadable entry in many a “Gen Ed” required English course syllabus, *Beowulf* is actually a beautiful – one might almost say sublime – work of art. As Daniel G. Donoghue writes in a *Harvard Magazine* review of Heaney’s translation, “One of the more challenging tasks ... has been moving students beyond the mechanics of translation to gain a sense of the poetry’s suppleness. ... In a typical phrase-by-phrase, glossary-driven translation, the original poetry is not only lost, but all traces of it can be obliterated in the sheer effort of trying to get a sense of the literal meaning.” [1]

Heaney preserves – perhaps more accurately reimagines, recrafts – the flowing beauty of the original by a fidelity to both its literal meaning, its cultural milieu, and its cadenced meter. By adhering to its alliterative quality, to the rhythmical pattern of Olde English with its caesural pause splitting each line in two and its use of enjambment to



reinforce the language's flow, Heaney avoids the dreary expository trap of a prose translation while still being faithful to the poem's literal storytelling.

Heaney, describing the psychic aftermath of Grendel's ravages, illustrates his skill:

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
and mourned under morning. ... (ll. 126-129)*

Grendel

Struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse. ... (ll.135-137)

All were endangered; young and old
were hunted down by that dark death-shadow
who lurked and swooped in the long nights
on the misty moors; nobody knows
where these reavers from hell roam on their errands. (ll. 159-163)

If in reading Heaney's translation one discovers *Beowulf's* beauty, the poem also leads to the rediscovery that authoritarianism's roots reside deep, very deep, in human culture, perhaps in human nature. Those roots go back past recorded history into the mists of human's hunter-gather origins and the band, clan, or tribe's need for protection. They go yet further back to troops of chimpanzees and gorillas needing an alpha male to protect them from marauding others.

The alpha male – the war lord – the warrior king protecting the realm antecedent to Thomas Carlyle's "great man theory" of leadership has since humans first crept across the savannas tempted many false saviors and beguiled many a bard. The earliest record of that in English literature is that bane of many an undergraduate – *Beowulf*.

As ancient as they are, these heroic tales are as recent, as fresh as the latest superhero sound-banger at the suburban multiplex. Whether as a *Spider-Man* PS4 video game or *Wonder Woman* at the cineplex or *The Lone Ranger* streaming on Starz Play Amazon channel, people still yearn for the lone hero to save them, if not from themselves, then from threatening "others." Many of us, like the sad-sack SUV driver I trailed this morning with his bumper sticker exhorting "Trump/Finally Someone with Balls" yearns for safety. On a less political note, we're all, at least in part, like Joan Didion recalling John Wayne movies during World War II when he told the girl in *War of the Wildcats* "I'll build you a house at the bend in the river where the

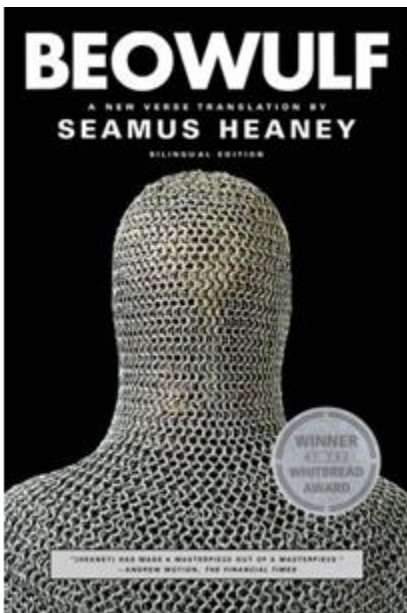
cottonwoods grow.” As Didion says “(D)eep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls, that is still the line I wait to hear.” [2]

We all want to be shielded. We all want someone else to confront the monster.

It’s as ancient as *Gilgamesh*, the oldest known story; it’s as ancient as Moses, that reluctant hero; it’s as ancient as Arjuna asking Krishna “Why?”; it’s as ancient as Achilles, Hector, Odysseus – fill-in the blank. In American lore, it finds expression in John Adams’ jealous complaint that when future generations tell the story of the American Revolution it’ll be that “Dr. Franklin smote the earth with his electrical rod, out sprang George Washington, and that was that.” It’s as contemporary as Vladimir Putin’s beef-cake posing to assert his strength [3] and Donald Trump saying “Only he can fix this mess – this American carnage.” [4]

It’s a new story. It’s an old story. It’s a perennial story.

And in *Beowulf* it’s a splendid story. A monster. The monster’s mother. A dragon, which J.R.R. Tolkien – yes, that J.R.R. Tolkien – thought was one of only two “real” dragons in Northern European literature. A valiant hero. A mead hall with boasting Vikings – actually Geats (Goths) from southern Sweden & their sometimes foes, sometimes allies of the Spear-Danes. Combat – hand-to-hand as Beowulf throttles Grendel; underwater as Beowulf slays Grendel’s mother and, finally, fire and sword as the dying Beowulf and his liege-man Wiglaf slay the dragon. Queens and courtiers. And cowards, too.



The story exists within a frame. It begins with peace only to be threatened by a monster. It ends 50 years later, the hero dead, the tribe’s peace threatened by menacing others ominously massing along the borderlands. As we journey across the story’s arc, we mature with our hero Beowulf from boastful youthful triumph to responsible kingship to the wisdom of old age, which wisdom teaches that responsibility never ends.

And, more ominously, there will always be dragons to slay.

So, let’s begin the story. By the way, the declaratory use of “**So**” to begin a statement or paragraph is an ancient Hiberno-English-“Scullionspeak,” to quote Seamus Heaney, rhetorical device that “operates as an expression which obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for

immediate attention.” [5] The scop – the oral bard – reciting to those gathered in the mead hall begins *Beowulf* with “So...”, which is to say, “Be quiet – listen”:

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes heroic campaigns. (ll. 1-3)

All was well, then:

... times were pleasant for the people there
until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens. ... (ll. 99-104)

“All were endangered; young and old. ...” (l. 159) No one escaped; all was threatened. Even Heorot, the mead hall of the Danish King Hrothgar, for “(Grendel) haunted the glittering hall after dark.” (l. 168) Across the sea in the land of the Geats, Beowulf, *thane* (that is liege to the Geat King Hygelac), heard of Grendel’s ravages. He, “the mightiest man on earth/high-born and powerful...” (ll. 197-198) determined to sail to the Spear-Dane’s rescue. When, upon landing in Denmark the coastal lookout confronts Beowulf and his men, Beowulf “...unlocked his word-hoard...” (l. 258) saying he had come to defeat Hrothgar’s enemy and “calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.” (l. 262) To which “the sentinel answered: ‘Anyone with gumption/and a sharp mind will take the measure/of two things: what’s said and what’s done.’” (ll. 287-289).

That night in Hrothgar’s hall, Beowulf, after divulging his lineage and exchanging greetings with Hrothgar, announces his mission and “boasts” of his great warrior feats which have “seen me bolstered in the blood of enemies/when I battled and bound five beasts/raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea/slaughtered sea-brutes.” (ll. 419-422)

“Boasting” was an accepted part of this overwhelmingly male, warrior culture. A hero had to not only be valiant, brave, and indomitable, but also be able to “sing” about his feats to the assembled clan. An ancient version of what Dizzy Dean, the great St. Louis Cardinal pitcher of the 1930s, once famously wise-cracked. “It ain’t bragging if you can back it up.” [6]

When challenged by Unferth, a rival in Hrothgar’s retinue, Beowulf replies “Well, Unferth, you have had your say/about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer/that was doing the talking.” (ll. 530-532) Unferth’s boasts are hollow, unbacked by actual experience. Somehow Unferth, while not exactly a bone-spurred draft-slacker,

managed never to be in the front of battle. He is quick to talk; quicker to let someone else do the fighting.

That night “In off the moors, down through the mist bands/God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping ...his rage boiled over, he ripped open/the mouth of the building, maddening for blood.” (ll. 710-712 & ll. 724-725)

Beowulf engages him in hand-to-hand combat, having forsworn the use of weapons. “The captain of evil (Grendel) discovered himself/in a handgrip harder than anything/he had ever encountered in any man/on the face of the earth.” (ll. 749-752) Beowulf rips Grendel’s arm off; the beast slinks away to his den to die; the trophy arm is nailed to the hall’s rafters and Hrothgar celebrates Beowulf as savior of his people. “Beowulf’s doings/were praised over and over again.” (ll. 855-856) and:

There was less tampering and big talk then
from Unferth the boaster, less of his blather
as the hall-thanes eyed the awful proof
of the hero’s prowess, the splayed hand
up under the eaves. (ll. 979-983)

An interlude follows. Hrothgar feasts Beowulf and awards him golden treasure. Hrothgar’s Queen Wealhtheow serves the *thanes* “Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord” (l. 1168) while a *scop* sings a song of their history, their feuds, and their truces. But the song carries an ominous undercurrent “...that death is not easily/escaped from by anyone:/all of us with our souls, earth-dwellers/and children of men, must make our way/to a destination already ordained/where the body, after the banqueting/sleeps on its deathbed.” (ll. 1001-1007)

But as they feasted, drank, listened to the *scop*, then slept, “Grendel’s mother/monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.” (ll. 1258-1259) She came to Heorot, “attacked and entered,” (l. 1282) slaughtered a *thane*, then when discovered by the others, “the hell-dam was in a panic, desperate to get out,” (l. 1293) she fled back to her underwater cave “... in a mere; the overhanging bank/is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface./At night there, something uncanny happens:/the water burns.” (ll. 1364-1367)

Beowulf and his men pursue her; at the loch, Beowulf declares only he will fight her. He dives into the lake, finds her cave. They fight; Beowulf seizes a sword Grendel’s mother had as a trophy and slays her – “Beowulf cut the corpse’s head off.” (l. 1590) After nine hours underwater, Beowulf makes his way back to his men and “The wide water, the waves and pools/were no longer infested once the wandering fiend/let go of life.” (ll. 1620-1622)

Once again, Hrothgar celebrates Beowulf, but this time the feasting, the singing is tempered by the knowledge that there will always be monsters to fight. And the greatest monster, perhaps, is that which lurks within – the seeking of earthly glory. Hrothgar admonishes:

Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.
For a brief while your strength is in bloom
but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow
illness or the sword to lay you low,
or a sudden fire or surge of water
or jabbing blade or javelin from the air
or repellent age. Your piercing eye
will dim and darken; and death will arrive,
dear warrior, to sweep you away. (ll. 1759-1768)

Beowulf *listens*, learns well. He returns to the land of the Geats, serves loyally as Hygelac's liege, for "Beowulf bore himself with valour;/he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour/and took no advantage..." (ll. 2177-2179) Upon Hygelac and his son's death, Beowulf ascends to the throne where he reigns in peace and prosperity for 50 years. His people safe behind his awesome presence, no enemy dare attack. The poet compresses this portion of Beowulf's life into an interlude, for peace is always an interlude.

But all is not well in the land of the Geats, for in a burrow sleeps a dragon guarding a hoard of gold, silver, precious gems, and jewelry that "long ago, with deliberate care/somebody now forgotten/had buried the riches of a high-born race/in this ancient cache." (ll. 2233-2236) Accidentally awakening the dragon, a wily-thief slunk in and stole a gem-studded goblet. Now, "the dragon awoke, trouble flared again./He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger/when he saw the footprints of the prowler who had stolen/too close to his dreaming head." (ll. 1287-1290)

Chaos is loosed in the land of the Geats, for "The hoard guardian/scorched the ground as he scoured and hunted/for the trespasser..." (ll. 1294-1296) "The dragon began to belch out flames/and burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow/that scared everyone, for the vile sky-winger/would leave nothing alive in his wake." (ll. 2302-2305) "Then Beowulf was given bad news,/a hard truth: his own home ... had been burnt to a cinder/the throne room of the Geats." (ll. 2324-2327)

Beowulf's thanes all return to his aid, to mount an army to slay the dragon. But, now an old man, Beowulf knows, as the warrior-king, that this is his fight and he "was too proud/to line up with a large army/against the sky-plague." (ll. 2343-2347) Then,

sitting down on a cliff top, the veteran King wearily recalls his many skirmishes, the battles he's won, and muses about the wisdom Hrothgar shared. There are no final battles; there will always be another. And that duty one embraced when young and unthinking one cannot now in the wisdom of old age escape. So, true to his duty, Beowulf "made a formal boast for the last time. 'I risked my life/often when I was young. Now I am old,/but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight...'" (ll. 2510-2513)

He fights the dragon with the aid of young Wiglaf, a loyal and brave knight, as was Beowulf himself when young. They slay the dragon. Beowulf is mortally wounded. Dying, he gives to Wiglaf the golden torque Wealtheow had given him when he slew Grendel – a literal and figurative passing of power to the younger man. The Geats build a funeral pyre atop a burrow on the sea's edge, so all will know a great man lived and lies here.**

But now, their enemies will also know the guardian is gone; they will ask themselves who is this Wiglaf, can he protect his people? And amidst that uncertainty "A Geat woman too sang out in grief;/with hair bound up, she unburdened herself/of her worst fears, a wild litany/of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,/enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,/slavery and abasement." (ll. 3150-3155)

In the famous essay "*The Monster and the Critics*," J.R.R. Tolkien rescues **Beowulf** from philological and antiquarian obscurity. **Beowulf**, he argues, was more than an Anglo-Saxon/Old English linguistic artifact, more than a historical artifact of a gone warrior culture. Created by an unknown artist, **Beowulf**, Tolkien asserts, was a supreme work of art. A work of art that meditates upon the timeless themes of humans in a hostile world, youth versus age and the problem of evil – why are there *monsters*? [7]

Daniel G. Donoghue, who I referenced earlier, succinctly summarizes **Beowulf's** themes:

"If Beowulf has an overarching message it is not about the hero's bravery or virtue, but rather the collective imperative to sustain culture in the face of human and supernatural forces of disintegration. The three monsters may be the most terrifying, but the poem also warns of the less fantastic dangers of feuds, dynastic struggles, greed, pride, and unchecked anger ... the Beowulf-poet creates a verbal world that idealizes a heroic life that was already ancient in the eighth century. Yet by the end the idealization gives way to a harder reality. After Beowulf has died of the wounds received in killing the dragon, his tribe anticipates its own annihilation at the hands of enemies. In spite of Beowulf's exemplary status, the poem refuses to end with

reassuring optimism and instead casts a cold eye on the capacity of humans to live according to their ideals.” [8]

Which brings us back to my opening question – what does Donald Trump share with **Beowulf**? Actually, not much, although in his fevered imagination one supposes he would like to fashion himself a “*Beowulf*.” But as Dizzy Dean implied, you have to be able to back it up.

Trump is no warrior. As such, he exposes the fallacy of “the great man” theory of leadership – of the lone hero who will ride into town, like Henry Fonda in **My Darling Clementine** or Gary Cooper in **High Noon** or Spider-Man or Wonder Woman and save us all. Once upon a time, that might have been true, but it also comes with a threat. That the “man on horseback,” consumed with “the less fantastic dangers of feuds, dynastic struggles, greed, pride, and unchecked anger” will deceive you, enthrall you and, like any number of false heroes, he (or she) will ultimately betray your fundamental ideals.

No, Trump is not Beowulf, although he might like to be. I’m not sure who, if anyone, in American history has that heroic stature. Maybe Washington, maybe Lincoln, maybe Harriet Tubman, maybe Martin Luther King, Jr., who, all in their very different ways, were strong, gallant “warriors” in the cause of justice rooted in America’s foundational ideals.

And that might be the key in our post-modern times, when the image of the “warrior” is not our gallant soldiers, sailors, and air force, but overweight, middle-aged guys on their Harley’s waving conflicting flags. The key might be that real heroism is not some fantasized fealty to a worn-out ethic of violence but an abiding faith in our cultural ideals combined with an awareness that no one is coming to rescue us.

We can only stave off the forces of cultural disintegration if we recognize we can only rescue ourselves, because we are all in this together. Tolkien understood that, for in his great trilogy **The Lord of the Rings** it is a common person – Frodo – who, assisted by a “team,” assumes the shire’s burden.

Remember – no one does anything alone.

It’s all about the team.

We are all members of the team and the team is the nation – out of many one – *e pluribus unum*.

And you thought **Beowulf** some unreadable English class assignment from long ago and far away. No – it is as relevant as the evening news!

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End Notes

*All quotations from **Beowulf** are from Heaney, Seamus. **Beowulf: A New Verse Translation**. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

1. Donoghue Daniel G. “*Beowulf in the Yard*”, **Harvard Magazine** March 1, 2000 <https://harvardmagazine.com/2000/03/beowulf-in-the-yard-html> accessed July 19, 2020.
 2. Didion, Joan. “*John Wayne: A Love Song*”, in **Slouching Towards Bethlehem**. (New York: A Delta Book, 1968), p. 30.
 3. Haltiwanger, John. “*I See No Need to Hide Behind Bushes: Putin Defends Shirtless Photos of Himself*”, **Business Insider** (June 5, 2018) available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-defends-shirtless-photos-i-see-no-need-to-hide-2018-6> accessed July 19, 2020.
 4. Cf. Trump, Donald. “*Remarks of President Donald J. Trump – As Prepared for Delivery Inaugural Address*”, January 20, 2017 available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> accessed July 19, 2020 and “*Acceptance Speech 2016 Republican National Convention*” July 22, 2016 available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pnmMxbEjdc> accessed July 19, 2020.
 5. Heaney, Seamus. **Beowulf: A New Verse Translation**. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. xxvii
 6. Dean, Dizzy. “*Quotes*”, at dizzydean.com available at <https://www.dizzydean.com/about/quotes/> accessed July 20, 2020.
 7. Tolkien, J.R.R. “*The Monsters and the Critics*”, at pdfs.semanticscholar.org available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/91af/2321967a9bac3a2eaf57b7ae763cd9475ba4.pdf> accessed July 21, 2020.
- Donoghue Daniel G. “*Beowulf in the Yard*”, **Harvard Magazine** March 1, 2000 <https://harvardmagazine.com/2000/03/beowulf-in-the-yard-html> accessed July 19, 2020
- Photo from <https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/beowulf>

** Although it dramatizes another ancient Anglo-Saxon legend, that of King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable, the ending of John Boorman’s 1980 film *Excalibur* shares some of the mood, atmosphere and mystery of the ancient Nordic warrior king’s death and the fealty owed his tribe. While not literally relevant to Beowulf, in tone and mood it offers you a glimpse of what the death of a king meant. It can be found [here](#).

For a taste of what Beowulf sounds like in the original Olde English (Anglo-Saxon), listen to Hillsdale College Professor of English Justin Jackson read the opening lines [here](#).