

Presented: War of the Wings, October 20, 2018

Author: Lady Gwenthwyfar Weale (Jennifer Erna Covel)

Email: gwenthwyfarweale@gmail.com

# SAVAGING THE HEOROT: A BEOWULF PRIMER

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the Society for Creative Anachronism we quite often talk about dreaming the dream of the middle ages. As time goes on, the perspective of that dream shifts and becomes more inclusive. A part of that inclusivity includes literature, moreover, literature that may initially seem too daunting, too archaic, too foreign. It is the intent of this lecture, and others like it, to provide a basis for not only approaching this literature but actually enjoying in ways similar to that of the original audiences.

There are a multitude of ways of viewing the *Beowulf* epic. This class outline will concern itself with providing a variety of topics to inspire readers into conducting their own inquiries into the manuscript. Initial topics include the monsters of *Beowulf*, women of *Beowulf*, the Finnesburg Fragment, and the impact that popular culture has had on the collective American conceptions of the story.

## 2. THE MANUSCRIPT

It is helpful to know a little bit about the *Beowulf* manuscript.

### A. The Beowulf Manuscript

- I. The date of the manuscript is not that of the poem and the date of the poem is not that of the story. The date of the *Beowulf* manuscript is highly contented by academics but there are a few salient facts available.
- II. The Beowulf manuscript in the Nowell Codex was created sometime between the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the 11<sup>th</sup> century. (Faulkner 171)
- III. Gregory of Tours, in 594, asserted that that Beowulf's liege lord, Hygelac of the Geats, was killed in a raid on the Frisians around 521. (Chickering 247)

### B. Old English

Beowulf was written in Old English.

- I. Modern English and Old English are not mutually intelligible.
- II. It is common to confuse Old English and Middle English.
  1. *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer were written in Middle English in 1357
  2. There is a difference of at least three centuries between the two.

### C. Literary Devices

Old English prose-poetry shares some characterizes with Old Norse prose and poetry.

- I. Alliteration is the repetition of a consonant sound between the beginning of two or more words in a row
  1. *"greedy and grim" (line 122)*
  2. *"the poet had performed, a pleasant murmur" (line 1160)*
- II. Assonance is the repetition of a vowel sound at the beginning or middle of a word for two or more words in a row but with different consonant sounds.
  1. *"the lofty house how" (line 116)*
  2. *"the hall of halls. Heorot" (line 78)*
- III. A caesura is a pause or a break in the center of a line of prose or poetry that gives the reader an idea of where to stop before beginning again.
  1. *So. The Spear-Danes* *in days gone by*
  2. *and the kings who ruled them* *had courage and greatness*
  3. *We have heard of those princes'* *heroic campaigns (lines 1-3)*
- IV. A Kenning is a compound metaphor that appears in Old English and Old Norse.
  1. *Whale-road*
  2. *Oar-steed*
  3. *Ring-giver*

### 3. CHARACTER TYPES AND TYPES OF CHARACTERS

#### A. The Monsters

The monsters in *Beowulf* are separated from the heroes and the victims; they are not members of society. This is illustrated in several ways.

- I. Anglo-Saxon culture was obsessed with lineage.
  1. *The relative value of a character is weighed by their patriarchal line.*
  2. *Ancestors and feats are listed in detail to illustrate their relative importance.*
- II. As Grendel, his mother, and the Dragon are lacking context and ties to the community as they have no clear lineage.
  1. *The Beowulf poem refers to them as "fatherless creatures" (1356).*
  2. *"And their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts" (1387).*
- III. It was understood as law that if one man injured or killed another, he owed that man's family a wergild.
  1. *This was an actual payment made, in cash or labor, to the victim's family.*
  2. *It kept the peace in the community after an incident of violence.*
- IV. Grendel, his Mum, and the dragon have no way of making any sort of peace as:
  1. *They are not a part of society.*
  2. *They cannot be made to pay for what they have done.*

#### B. Women

Two different types of women appear in *Beowulf*, the human and the monstrous.

- I. The primary function of human women within the *Beowulf* narrative is that of peace-weavers. (Chance 155) and two of them are:
  1. *Wealhtheow is a peace-pledge (Chance 159).*
  2. *Hildeburh as she unites the Danes and Frisians. (Chance 159).*
- II. Women weave this peace through the passing of the cup and granting of gifts.
  1. *Wealhtheow uses the passing of a cup as a way of convincing her husband to leave his kingdom to his sons (1159-1191line).*
  2. *Wealhtheow gives a necklace to Beowulf to show her favor. (1192-1214)*
- III. Wealhtheow is singular as she is a mirror of Hildeburh from the Lay of Finn (Olesiejko) as in the narrative they do the same things:
  1. *Give life to the line of succession.*
  2. *Serve as a warning of the misfortune that can come to inter-tribal alliances.*
- IV. Grendel's mother is the anti-woman, in this case. She brings war instead of peace. Masculine, rather than feminine pronouns, are used to describe her.
  1. *There is a focus on her inhuman aspects. She is described as a:*
    - a. *"monstrous woman" (2120).*
    - b. *"lady monster woman" (1259).*
  2. *She is referred to using masculine (un-woman) terms including that of:*
    - a. *A male guardian (2136).*
    - b. *A warrior (1379).*
    - c. *A destroyer (1339).*

#### 4. NESTED NARTATIVE: THE FINNSBURH FRAGMENT

Beowulf features nested narratives, and this is one of the most famous. Typically, the nested narratives offer a complement or a counter-example to the current action. They appear in the text as a story relayed to the characters through speech or through song. Set in Beowulf as it is, it serves the purpose of a cautionary tale.

A. Finnsburh Fragment<sup>1</sup>, tells the story of a disastrous marriage that was meant to seal a truce.

I. It is referred to as a fragment given that, “Presumably the story of what happened in Finnsburh was sufficiently well known that the poet had no need to explain the wider situation.” (DiNapoli 187)

II. Many details are omitted but the meaning is clear.

1. *It is meant as a warning to Wealhtheow as to the precariousness of her situation and that of her children should Hrothgar give too much away.*

2. *It also illustrates the limited roles of women in a male-dominated warrior society.*

a. *They cannot determine the winners or the losers.*

b. *They can only bare witness and suffer the consequences of the male actors.*

III. The story is as follows.

1. *It opens with a bereft Hildeburh, a Danish princess married to a Finn. She is grieving because:*

a. *Hildeburh’s brother, Dane Hnaef visits her only for that visit to end in violence.*

i. There is an alliance between the Jutes and Danes.

ii. The Frisians have a truce with the allied groups.

b. *War breaks out.*

c. *As a consequence of this war, her son and her brother are killed, and she is left to organize their cremation.*

i. They could have fought on the same side or against each other.

ii. They are still burned on the same pyre.

d. *This war only ends in another uneasy truce once winter is upon them.*

e. *Hildeburh’s husband, Finn, is eventually slain.*

f. *She returns back home with the Danes.*

---

<sup>1</sup> This is also known as Lay of Finn, Finnsburh Episode, or the Fight at Finnsburh.

## 5. *BEOWULF* IN POPULAR CULTURE

*Beowulf* has inspired creators in the present just like it did in the past. The majority of creations are adaptations. This requires that a series of decisions be made that influence the end product's narrative. Many of these decisions revolve around how the writer or director determines the use of perspective, characterization, and theme.

### A. Movies Inspired by *Beowulf* include but are not limited to:

- I. *The Thirteenth Warrior* released in 1999 and directed by John McTiernan.
  1. It featured Antonio Banderas as *Eben*.
  2. It is based on Michael Crichton's book, *Eaters of the Dead*.
- II. *Beowulf* released in 1999 directed by Graham Baker.
  1. It featured Christopher Lambert as *Beowulf*.
  2. It was a Post-Apocalyptic Mad-Max themed film.
- III. *Beowulf and Grendel* released in 2005 directed by Sturla Gunnarsson.
  1. It featured Gerard Butler as *Beowulf*.
  2. It has witches and Iceland as the backdrop.
- IV. *Beowulf* released in 2007 directed by Robert Zemeckis.
  1. The script was written by Neil Gaiman.
  2. *Grendel's* mom is interpreted as a seductress that sleeps with *Hrothgar* and tries to seduce *Beowulf*. (*Vaz*)

### B. Books inspired by *Beowulf* include but are not limited to:

- I. *Grendel* by John Garner.
  1. The story is told from *Grendel's* point of view.
  2. *Grendel* and the Dragon get to have a discussion.
- II. *Eaters of the Dead* by Michael Crichton.
  1. *Eaters of the Dead* is a fictitious retelling of the *Beowulf* story combined with a very real travelogue commonly known as the *Risala* written by Ibn Fadlan in 921- 922.
  2. Crichton's goal was to make a very sort of realistic *Beowulf* story and to that end, mixed historical reality with fantasy. (*Crichton 2*)
- III. *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dahvana Headley.
  1. A modern-day trauma-reading of *Beowulf* from the perspective of the female characters.
  2. It addresses gender as well as class issues.
    - a. *Grendel's* mother (*Dana*) is a traumatized veteran living rough.
    - b. *Wealhtheow* (*Willq*) lives in a gated community.
    - c. *Beowulf* (*Ben Wolf*) is a cop.

### C. Contemporary Popular Culture Perceptions

- I. Questions to consider after engaging with adaptations are as follows
  1. Is the focus of the story about *Beowulf* or is it about the monsters?
  2. Who is telling the story and why?
  3. How does engaging with adaptations change your view of the original?

## 6. CITATIONS

- Chance, Jane, "The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother." *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, 2002, pp. 152-167. Norton & Company, Inc. New York
- Chickering, Howel, *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition*. Random House, 2006
- Chickering, Howel., Allen J. Frantzen, and R. F. Yeager, editors. *Teaching Beowulf in the Twenty-First Century*. Arizona Center for Medieval Arts, 2014.
- Crichton, Michael. *Eaters of the Dead*. Random House, 1976
- DiNapoli, Robert. *A Far Light: A Reading of Beowulf*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016
- Fadlān, Ibin. *Ibin Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*. Translated by Dahhan, S., Penguin, 2012
- Faulkner, Mark. "Teaching Beowulf In Its Manuscript Context." *Teaching Beowulf in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Howell Chickering, Franzen, Yeager, Arizona Center for Medieval Arts, 2014, pp. 169-175
- Fjalldal, Magnus, "An Unnoticed Beowulf Analogue in Heimskringala." *Notes and Queries*, September. 2013, pp. 341-43. *Oxford University Press*, doi:10.1093/notesj/gjt.151.
- Headley, Maria Dahvana. *The Mere Wife*. Farr, Strauss, and Giroux, 2018
- Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Faber and Faber Unlimited, 1999
- Gardner, John. *Grendel*, Random House, 1971
- Olesiejko, Jaek, "Wealhtheow's Peace-Weaving: Diegesis and Genealogy of Gender in Beowulf." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, May. 2014. *College of Foreign Languages, Swiecie*, doi:10.2478/stap-2014-0005.
- Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-Earth*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003
- Tolkien, J.R.R., *Beowulf*, Houghton Mifflin, 2014
- Vaz, Mark Cotta., Steve Starkey. *The Art of Beowulf*. Chronicle Books, 2007