

## On Anglo-Saxon Cultural Views Displayed in Beowulf

*“It's an old German legend, there's always going to be a mountain in there somewhere and [...] a fire-breathing dragon there to guard the mountain.”*

- Cristoph Waltz as Dr. King Schulz in *Django Unchained* (2012)

*Author's note: my parenthetical citations of the text WILL include Heaney's name as an act of civil disobedience intending to recognize the necessity of his role as a translator; regardless of the scorn held for the practice by the authorities of MLA formatting.*

- SJBC

Swords and shields, axes with names, mead-halls, kenning-phrases, funeral pyres, character titles with an unpronounceable quantity of consonants: this is the world of *Beowulf*, a world populated by Canaanite monsters and knights and thanes and retainers (still don't know what that means) and kings and queens and tradeable sex-action-figures for daughters, all brimming with a hellfire-burning desire to inflict gratuitous Dark-Age violence on anyone in sight - a world with a need to define in-groups and out-groups, *fast*. I once heard an enlightened scholar (a stick figure on YouTube named Sam O'Nella) refer to the Dark Ages as history's angsty teenage years, where all we wanted to do was play the lute in our room and burn heretics with our friends; I find it necessary at this point to specify the distinction between the Dark or Early Medieval Age in which the text is *set* and the Middle (Medieval) Age in which the text was *written*; yet the majority of cultural values *are consistent* across both periods, including the exaltation of bravery, the prejudicial wergild, and the presence of fate; the main difference in principle between the narrator and the text's characters is a notably Christian agenda and the reality of paganism in Anglo-Saxon culture previous to the Middle Ages. As the narrator's doctrine serves as more of a

religious/spiritual than a distinctly cultural and moral framework, I find it appropriate to focus on other important systems of cultural and ethical valuation present in the text than Christianity. Hence, this essay plans to delve into the use of Anglo-Saxon cultural values - such as the reverence of bravery, the importance of honor, and the inescapability of fate, particularly in the endowment of *wergild* - to justify violence against enemies of the culture.

Simply put, Beowulf and his men, and the men of which he is one - a thane, a king - are courageous individuals, and his enemies are not. Courage being among the most desirable qualities of an up-and-coming noble warrior, he displays his steadfast and iron-willed nature in steeling himself before Hrothgar in advance of his battle with Grendel, "'I had a fixed purpose when I went to sea. / As I sat in the boat with my band of men, / I meant to perform to the uttermost / what your people wanted or perish in the attempt, / in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose, / prove myself with a proud deed / or meet my death here in the mead-hall" (Heaney's translation, 632-638), as well as in his old age, where his consistent bravery has landed him at the head of a warrior's meritocracy: "I risked my life / often when I was young. Now I am old / but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight / for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only / abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open." (Heaney's translation 2511-2515). And this "fiend" in the former quote to which Beowulf refers, Grendel, exemplifies a perfectly antithetical, diametrically-opposed and near-pitiable cowardice, particularly in fleeing the site of his final attack on Heorot after receiving a mortal wound from Beowulf, "...The dread of the land was desperate to escape, to take a roundabout road and flee to his lair in the fens" (Heaney, 763-765), and is almost sympathized with for his fearfulness by the poet in saying that, "Grendel, sick at heart, fled to his desolate den, his miserable hole" (Heaney, lines 821-822).

Grendel's flight is immensely important to reinforcing him as a Jungio-Beauvarian Other to Anglo-Saxon values: Heredot as a locale is the cultural nexus of a martial society, a place of honor and nobility particularly relative to violence, "Heorot, the hall of halls, where the king / held court with his

band of warriors, and allowed no treachery. / The war-band rejoiced together: the fellowship and the high company" (Heaney's, 405-408); this is a place literally and figuratively *invaded* by Grendel's spinelessness and refusal to abide by Anglo-Saxon honor codes. A battle in Hereodt between an equally-honorable "band of warriors" such as the Danes and Heathobards that Beowulf refers to in his later digression to Hygelac is treated exceedingly differently from Grendel's invasion, his penetration of the walls of Beowulf's society, his *lonely war*, "So Grendel waged his lonely war, / inflicting constant cruelties on the people, / atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot, / haunted the glittering hall after dark; / but the throne itself, the treasure-seat, / he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast." (Heaney, lines 164-169), taken and compared to the Dane-Heathobard conflict, "...the Heathobard lord / will be bound to feel less than happy / as he watches and recalls how the Danes / killed and humiliated him, plundering the place, / taking his tribe's treasures, / while they wore the spoils of his people at the feast..." (Heaney, lines 2032-2037). Warriors of renown such as the Heathobards, while evidently of a different tribe, still exist within the moral boundaries of Anglo-Saxon society and are treated as such, assumed to do such things as pay *wergild* and honor their dead, where Grendel does not, and is therefore an outcast: "Nor did he (Grendel) care to offer wergild / for his crimes; even though it was custom / to pay for the slaughter of a kinsman with gold, / Grendel's bloody rampages continued without end" (156-158).

## Works Cited

Heaney, Seamus, translator. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.