The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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Published by Punctum Books

G.Tracy, Kisha and John P.Sexton.
The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist.

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What’s the Message?: Building Community through Tolkien’s *Beowulf*

_Holly M. Wendt, Lebanon Valley College_

When I was asked to participate in a series of summer book talks, I had a number of decisions to make. The first — to participate at all — was easy. As a faculty member finishing up the first year on the tenure track at a new campus, I jumped at the chance to take part in a long-running partnership between my institution and an active, engaged local community. The second decision — the book — was far more difficult. The series’ scope ranged wide; the other texts on the schedule leaned heavily toward history, biography, and accessible social and natural science. As someone whose academic interests and teaching responsibilities lay evenly split between creative writing and medieval literature, I was, like Chaucer’s Troilus, in *kankedort*.¹ But I found resolution in J.R.R. Tolkien’s translation of *Beowulf*. Tolkien’s *Beowulf* struck the right balance of intellectually interesting and more broadly appealing; if *Beowulf* itself didn’t draw people in, perhaps Tolkien’s name might. *The Hobbit* film franchise, after all, had just drawn to a close, and the bulk of the book talk attend-

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ees would be seniors. If they had children, those children would have been of an age to discover Tolkien’s creative works in their youth. This audience, too, might have better memory of Peter Jackson’s screen adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy than my current sophomores, who were only four years old when the first movie came out.

Between graduate school, a full-time position at a community college, and the position I now hold as an assistant professor at a small liberal arts college, I’ve taught the early English literature survey at least once a year for a decade, as well as upper-division Middle English literature and a medieval studies-themed first year writing course. In those courses, especially in the survey, Tolkien has been my populist inroad into *Beowulf*, a more contemporary point from which to enter the text. Sometimes, I feel a bit fraudulent starting there; the niggling scholarly doubt says *aren’t I a medievalist?* What do I *need* this fantasy touchstone for? Then sense takes over: I don’t *need* it — I *love* it. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*, in parts, are also a love song to medieval studies and languages. And if my purpose in the book talk series was to take *Beowulf* out of the classroom — a space marked by obligation and underwritten by a sense of duty in both the most and the least enthusiastic students — and bring it into a purely voluntary space, on what turned out to be a perfect summer morning, well off-campus, it was the love song I wanted to sing.

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Convincing people of the value of medieval studies is hard — more than hard. What most will allow is that medieval studies, like other history-based pursuits, has to do with old stuff, and knowledge about old stuff — especially stuff that has actually happened — is a source of cultural capital. There is *Jeopardy*!, after all. But when the focus shifts to literature, especially fragmented, anonymous texts in languages undecipherable without specialized training, it’s a harder sell still. As I prepared
my talk, I admit to thinking long on that point, second-guessing my choice.

My campus — and the neighboring town where I gave the talk — are in the heart of south-central Pennsylvania, in the shrugging green shoulders of the Appalachians. While we’re not so far away from Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York — and from larger universities with medievalists of different stripes across multiple departments — the immediate surroundings are rather isolating despite the reality that, within an hour’s drive of my campus home, there are at least half a dozen similar institutions. Geographically, that seems a gift. Practically, the circumstance is far more complex: at those similar colleges, we lone medievalists are also carrying robust teaching loads that often engage other areas of study and wearing multiple hats with regard to service, advising, and developing engaging, productive, and often interdisciplinary ways to bring medieval studies into the wider curriculum. Those myriad duties make it difficult to add building relationships beyond the campus borders to the to-do list. The difficulty is increased by the relative isolation even on one’s home campus; I’m not only the lone medievalist in the English department, I’m also the only one at the institution whose research connects explicitly to pre-modern Europe. To be fair, of course, multiple colleagues in multiple disciplines face the same challenge; having a limited number of faculty ensures breadth of coverage over depth, and the more specific or arcane one’s field — say, Anglo-Saxon poetry, let alone medieval studies at large — the less likely one will find felicitous overlap with colleagues in history or music or art history.

It was, though, within that context of isolation that I found the way to push back against the doubt. The chance to take medieval studies out of the confines of my classroom was a two-fold boon: it was an opportunity to share aspects of my own work and my favorite poem with a crowd of people self-selected as interested in learning diverse things, and it was a chance to make a community, no matter how temporary, and to enlarge my own, by however small a measure.
To my happy surprise, sixty people—twice the size of the largest class I teach, which is, incidentally, the English literature survey—attended. Because I’d been told to prepare as though few had read the book in advance—and because I hoped it might inspire some to read the book after—I reviewed the history and content of *Beowulf* and then zeroed in on Tolkien’s approach as a translator, closing with the way his translation and linguistic engagement ultimately affected *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. When the Q&A began, I was threefold glad I had chosen this particular text. The audience brought lively questions: further inquiries into the preservation of the *Beowulf* manuscript, some wondering about the linguistic movement between Old and Middle English. Someone asked about the Great Vowel Shift, someone else about the inclusion of the poem in so many high school curricula. It was, in short, the exact kind of curiosity I’d hoped would bubble up: wide-ranging, expansive, and in the context of other learned things.

Someone else, then, asked, “What was Tolkien’s message?”

That was a question I hadn’t anticipated, one with many possible answers and so weighty that I needed to try. So I started with the translation itself.

Tolkien does not undertake a poetic translation. According to Christopher Tolkien, who had been the one to arrange J.R.R. Tolkien’s notes and papers into the book manuscript and also to type up his father’s hand-written and annotated translations so many years ago, the primary goal of Tolkien’s translation is clarity of meaning as it pertains to understanding the world of the poem. In order to best serve that meaning, Tolkien also opts not to write in a particularly alliterative fashion, focusing instead on choosing the best words in the best order to convey the hero’s deeds and the world of the Danes and the Geats, without any extensive formal or poetic constraints.

The predominant theory Tolkien espouses throughout the commentary included in the volume is that *Beowulf* must have

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had its roots in a folk tale, a fairy story of some kind. Rather than simply making the claim, Tolkien also wrote an iteration of such a fairy story: *Sellic Spell*, which is included in the volume.

In the creation of the tale, Tolkien reinforces his commitment to that textual clarity. Rather than allowing the idea of the fairy story to remain in the abstract, *Sellic Spell* serves as a concrete example of what that story, according to Tolkien’s thesis, must have been like. The fairy story is also capped by a rendition of *Sellic Spell* in Old English, an attempt to bring the whole full-circle. Over and over, Tolkien’s work shows a devotion to a reader’s understanding; even where prudence requires a bit of equivocation—it *might* have been like this—he makes no such equivocation in what the *like this* might be.

But that wasn’t the answer to the full question. The asker added another layer, invoking the writing of C.S. Lewis, Tolkien’s friend and fellow writer. The man reframed the question as a point of difference: Lewis’s writings were allegorical and rife with overt Christian symbolism; Tolkien made all attempts to avoid the same in his own work. To wit, then, the question re-posed had other implications: what was Tolkien’s message—with regard to the sense that Lewis’s message was explicitly Christian?

I turned to the larger themes of good versus evil: in that regard, surely, Tolkien and Lewis demonstrated agreement. Both writers’ and their novels’ sympathies align with good. That Tolkien seems less interested in aligning that particular goodness with any immediately recognizable framework does not change his novels’ bent toward it.

We had stepped beyond the bounds of *Beowulf*, and yet the same phenomenon occurs in *Beowulf*. Though the Danes and Geats appear to be generally pagan and the poet-narrator moralizes in favor of Christianity from time to time, the poem indefatigably praises certain secularly motivated behaviors via a protagonist who acts to defend others, who keeps his word, who does not abuse the superlative powers given him. That Beowulf is a hero whose greatest concerns are a mortal definition of hon-

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or and an earthly fame ultimately does not matter: the poem champions what is admirable, even when it is considered transient in comparison to the poet’s own faith.

With that response, the asker seemed satisfied. Someone else signaled for the questions microphone, and on we went. But no matter that the answer didn’t feel untrue, something about what I’d said left me dissatisfied. Something about it wasn’t round enough, wasn’t full enough. There had to be more to it; on this point, easily articulated reasons couldn’t match the physical sensation brought forth in reading these texts, the feeling that feeling was too large for the confines of my ribs.

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A little less than a month later, my English Literature I students read Seamus Heaney’s translation of Beowulf, and even though Tolkien’s text wasn’t in front of them, I couldn’t resist a little detour. I usually show clips from the 2002 film iteration of The Two Towers: King Theoden’s grief over his own dead son is an echo of King Hrethel, and the ubi sunt passage is a clear hearkening to “The Wanderer” and the elegiac list of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The trappings of the film scenes also offer an opportunity to talk, in more vivid detail, about burial mounds, armor and clothing, and even the Geatish woman’s lament that marks the poem’s end. But this time, Tolkien’s words and scholarship felt nearer still.

The character Unferth, who becomes Unfriend in Tolkien’s Sellic Spell, is always a point of interest in class discussions. First and foremost, Unferth is the subject of ridicule, recipient of a “shut up, you’re drunk” admonition that provides a resonant moment of levity. He’s also one of the few characters who appears to undergo change in Beowulf; whether it is Unferth’s

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duty as Hrothgar’s *þyle* to challenge and insult Beowulf to test his mettle or whether he is simply a jealous coward, Unferth’s treatment of the hero eventually alters such that Unferth sends his own ancestral sword with Beowulf into Grendel’s mother’s mere. Though the sword ultimately proves useless in that fight, the generosity of the gesture is noteworthy, and Beowulf respects both sword and lender enough to bring the weapon back to the surface with him, despite the burden of the giant-sword hilt and Grendel’s severed head that he also carries. The exchange of esteem and the return of Unferth’s family sword crystalizes that change: a loudmouth reconsiders his words and behavior, and his adversary forgives him. Perhaps for these reasons, Unferth feels more real to my students than Beowulf, with all of his superlative qualities, and wise, weary Hrothgar. In conversation about Unferth this time, a detail that came up in the summer talk bubbled again to the surface.

In his notes to the translation, Tolkien discusses his choices regarding particular words referring to the Geats’ armor as they enter Hrothgar’s hall—the apparent manuscript phrase “guþ-mod grummon” and his proposed emendation to “guþmod grima.” Tolkien’s point is grammatical—he favors a representative singular instead of a plural—but he draws attention to the word *grima*, a mask or visor that at least partially covers the face. In another later comment, expressly dealing with Unferth, Tolkien calls him “wormtongued.” Readers of Tolkien’s fiction now recognize a significant character in the land of Rohan: Grima Wormtongue, pawn of the evil wizard Saruman and Theoden’s corrupted adviser. In the presentation, this detail served as a pleasing little proof of how Tolkien’s linguistic felicity asserted itself in his creative work: the mask-word, plus a reference to a somewhat duplicitous character in *Beowulf*, equals a whole new fictional entity. But the presence of Old English names and references in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* aren’t mere scholarly Easter eggs. Grima Wormtongue appears to be a character

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6 Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 205.
7 Ibid, 253.
literally born from Tolkien’s deep consideration of the poem and its characters, of the translation and notes he made as an educator himself.

The students in my English literature survey are mostly non-English majors. There are some, but the course meets a general education requirement, and so the majority of the students are from disciplines far afield from my own. But the business and biology and actuarial science majors who find their way into the class have chosen this particular course from a pool of several for some reason. It’s also the course in which students are most likely to be reading a novel — something that has nothing to do with any of their classes — in the minutes before the course begins. There are always people in the class interested in creative writing. Some of these are the English majors, and many are not. But, like Tolkien, they are people deeply interested in stories.

So if I could go back to that morning in August, I would revise my answer about Tolkien’s message thus to add: Tolkien’s best message, perhaps, is that there is great power in stories, especially this one. In his 1936 essay, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” Tolkien asserted Beowulf scholarship could only live its fullest life when those studying the poem accepted it as a story, a tale, rather than solely a linguistic artifact or a historical patchwork. It was as a story — a story he taught, translated, reinvented as Sellic Spell, and then re-translated in an Old English iteration of Sellic Spell — that Beowulf rippled through Tolkien’s own invented worlds. Even the poem’s language — the great hurdle for most students of Beowulf and in which Tolkien delighted — was a font of character and motivation in the Middle Earth he built. In reading all of these works, in coming again to the language, to the characters, to the meanings, we make meaning. We build that world anew.

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Only a few weeks ago — a full two months after the book talk — I received an e-mail from one of the women who'd attended. A “word of the day” subscription brought “kenning” into her inbox. That precipitated her to write to me, as she'd also read that Beowulf’s name was derived from the kenning “bee-wolf,” or bear; she wanted to know whether that was indeed correct.

Wearing my responsible *Beowulf* scholar hat, I noted first that there were few firm answers where the details of the poem were concerned; the scholarly opinion on “Beowulf” as an overt reference to a bear remains divided. There are the stories of Bodvar Bjarki and Hrolf Kraki, with which the *Beowulf* poem might share some common ground, but excessive strength alone does not a bear-man make. That Tolkien chose to embrace the possibility in *Sellic Spell* by naming his proto-Beowulf Beewulf outright speaks more for the imaginative capacity contained in the word “Beowulf.” The entire poem's imaginative capacity was something Tolkien valued. And on I went, certainly for longer than was strictly necessary, but, I hope, not longer than was interesting.

In the moments after I'd sent off the reply, it occurred that she'd sent me the question not only because she'd been to the presentation, but because she had access to a local medievalist, to a person who'd publicly claimed affinity for and fascination with not only one translation but a poem, a period, and all the echoes and flickers of light across the sea of *then* and *now*. She did not send her question to the leading scholars in the field, but rather to someone in her community. In that e-mail, too, I understood that I wasn’t really sitting alone in my proverbial boat. She rowed with me, and the man who wanted to know something about Tolkien's message, and the rest; my English Literature I students — nearly thirty new ones each semester, together all of us comprising the strength Beowulf wields in each arm⁹ — take up oars together, and so, too, we sing.

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