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Recommended Citation

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FROM BAGGINS TO BEOWULF AND BACK AGAIN: TEACHING (VIA) TOLKIEN

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Beowulf is, traditionally at least, a difficult text for incoming freshmen. *The Hobbit* is arguably less so. In part this has much to do with their respective languages: one is so archaic as to seem foreign, the other is as comfortable as an old English shoe. One is a tale told to children around a quiet fire, the other an elegy shouted above raucous barbarians at beer. *Beowulf* is peppered with digressions, and shot through with violent revenge cycles. *The Hobbit* is a relatively straightforward quest, adventures along the way notwithstanding. They are, on the surface at least, as distinct as night and day.

I would argue, of course, that like Bilbo himself, there is more to each than first meets the eye. There is in fact a little Baggins in the *Beowulf*, and a little *Beowulf* in our Baggins, and this can be employed to slowly draw students into an understanding of the overwhelmingly foreign Old English poem *Beowulf*. Conversely, by understanding the traditional *Beowulfian* motifs employed by Tolkien in *The Hobbit*, his own sub-creation can be appreciated as more than “just” a children’s story.

This type of intertextual reading, of course, is nothing new. Bonniejean Christensen pointed out the similarities between the two texts in 1969, and many of the observations she makes in her 1989 essay in *Mythlore*, “Tolkien’s Creative Technique: *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*,” form the basis for my present freshman writing course, “From Baggins to *Beowulf*: Reading Saxon Fictions.” That is, we read *Beowulf* by way of *Hobbiton*, and to re-read *The Hobbit* by way of *Daneland*. What I’d like to do now is walk you through the highlights of my approach (simple though it is), and report to you some of the student reactions thus far. Again, my basic premise is this: by first reading *The Hobbit*—an essentially non-threatening text, pedagogically speaking—students are able to create a vocabulary with which they can then read *Beowulf*: again, an inevitably threatening text.

The class first read *The Hobbit* as they would any other literary work, and generally according to the interests of the students. Better than half the class—and let me just take a moment: I’ve got 15 students, all freshman, split about 2:1 male-heavy along gender lines)—so better than half the class has read *The Hobbit* before (and most of those who’ve read *The Hobbit* have also read *The Lord of the Rings*). Slightly less than half had already read *Beowulf* in one translation or another. Of those with previous exposure, everyone either “liked” or “loved” *The Hobbit*. Conversely, most had less-than-fond memories of *Beowulf*, which they “had to read” in high school. Not surprisingly, we had little difficulty getting through the plot of *The Hobbit*, and class discussion was fairly animated early on. (One unexpected concern: keeping those who had already read *The Hobbit* in full from ruining the ending for the rest—a minor problem: you can live with those).

Now, this is primarily a writing course, so I tried to encourage thesis development and argument through short, one-page response papers (about one a week, in response to each section of reading). These short papers could then be expanded into 4-5 page papers at the end of each major work. Although I tried to let the students have more-or-less free reign as far as their early paper topics were concerned, a quick peek at the abbreviated syllabus will show that I was none-too-subtly leading them into readings hinging on Middle-Earth’s monsters.

Actually, let me walk you through the syllabus—and I’ll explain my little deceit. As you can see, I broke *The Hobbit* into thirds—and that’s pragmatics as much as anything else—page divisions have to be about equal or students will balk. But the chapters really break into geographic zones—Bilbo and company leave the Misty Mountains in Chapter Six, then break out of Mirkwood in Ten, and spend the rest of the novel in and around the Lonely Mountain before returning (quickly) to *Hobbiton*. Nevertheless, I’ve listed these chapters according to the monsters: Dwarves, Trolls, The Dragon, etc. in order to make clear the “monstrous” parallels between *The Hobbit* and *Beowulf*. Now the *Beowulf* I have divided honestly according to the monsters: Grendel, Grendel’s Dam, The Dragon. These are by no means exact 1:1 relationships—Gollum is not “equal to” Grendel by any means—but I think that just by putting these labels on the syllabus the students then look to the monsters as central to the texts, and they focus their readings accordingly.

But enough of the syllabus for now. Our in-class discussions of *The Hobbit* worked around not only the monsters but around good old Anglo-Saxon themes: revenge, greed, heroism. By the time we got to the 4-5 page *Hobbit* papers, we had a pretty good showing of “Bilbo as hero” theme (questions like “how does the ring/heredity/action define the hero?”),

and even a few papers on the internal parallelism in the monster scenes (Bilbo:Spiders::Gandalf:Trolls). Some students took chances, and I don't think anyone "froze up" in the face of what they might consider "serious" literature. So basic writings on *The Hobbit* went well.

At the physical transition point between our primary texts (Week Five), we read Tolkien's seminal essay, "The Monsters and the Critics." This proved more difficult for some students than others. While I tend to enjoy Tolkien's often-humorous critical style, it took some doing to get the students to splinter out Tolkien's own views from his criticism of others' views. (I had one student confidently agree with Tolkien that *Beowulf* was "the confused product of a committee of muddle-headed and probably beer-bemused Anglo-Saxons"). But bar the unfortunate misreading or two, spending the better part of two classes doping out Tolkien's major points seemed to have helped. With the monsters in mind, we set out to read *Beowulf*.

We used Roy Liuzza's translation (2000), which I like and find readable. While I know that Seamus Heaney's translation has gotten the lion's share of attention this year, I heartily recommend Liuzza—his appendices alone are worth buying, and his translation is straightforward. Nevertheless, my students did have a much harder go of it reading *Beowulf* than *The Hobbit*. They tended to—despite Tolkien's advice, and mine—to get lost in the digressions, and to pepper me with questions about history and dating and accuracy and Truth. Part of the class immediately split into Christian and Anti-Christian sects. Freshmen are an odd bunch.

Nevertheless, we drew plenty of monster parallels from *The Hobbit* (naturally this was easiest with the Dragon), as well as from Liuzza's appendices (we read selections from *Grettisaga*, *Blickling Homily*, *Ynglinga Saga*). The supplementary material was well received, although I regret not backgrounding some pieces better. Some students frankly liked *Grettisaga* better than *Beowulf*, in part "because it's shorter." I had to clear that up quickly. Others considered *Beowulf* a "rip-off" of *Grettir*, or just a cheap copy. But at least students thought about story creation and copyright infringement—and copyright was not a concept I expected to deal with—especially at this point in the course.

The longer papers on *Beowulf* were better written than those on *The Hobbit*—no doubt in part because students have gotten accustomed to my grading criteria. But I also think that their critical thinking improved—in part because we had put *The Hobbit* behind us (and I mean that in a good sense). Once they warmed to the monsters in *Beowulf*, and quite frankly, learned to ignore some of the digressions, they were willing to dissect the text and not hold it at arms length.

As with *The Hobbit*, we had a good number of papers devoted to the idea of the hero, some vilified *Beowulf*, others glorified him. We had two opposing stances on the Christianity in the text: veneer versus essence. Two papers invoked the monomyth idea, seeing the there-and-back-again motif of *Beowulf* as strong an element as it was in *The Hobbit*. Most incorporated the monsters into their theses. Some justified monstrous actions (everyone seemed to sympathize with Grendel's "Mom"—apparently revenge is still an accepted family value among Emorites). And I found it odd that they wouldn't call her "Grendel's Dam". Others defined the hero by the monster—one student described *Beowulf* as a "professional monster slayer," who was—incidentally—a lousy fighter against humans. Finally, one student plagiarized a paper comparing *The Wizard of Oz* to *Beowulf*. Go figure. But on the whole, I think the class responded well to *Beowulf*, despite initial misgivings. I like to think they warmed up to *Beowulf* in part because of their exposure to the creative and scholarly Tolkien.

If you'll look at the syllabus again, following Spring Break, we went into some modern takes on *Beowulf* as part of an ink-shedding project (where we did some creative writing and point of view exercises). We screened Michael Crichton's *The Thirteenth Warrior*, supplemented by a reading of Ibn Fadlan's "Account of the Rus." Students generally had a hard time getting past the cultural biases of Ibn Fadlan's account—they too readily agreed with the Arab's view of the Rus as disgusting barbarians. Apparently having sex in front of others and killing slave maidens is always in bad taste. But our classroom ethnocentrism allowed us to discuss point-of-view issues, and I think most came out of discussion with slightly more open minds.

The Thirteenth Warrior was well received (everyone loves a movie), and most of discussion revolved around the de-monsterizing of the monsters. If you haven't seen the movie, the Dragon is now cavalry, and Grendel's Dam is a poison-wielding witch woman. Most of the class (agreeing with Tolkien) felt that by decreasing the supernatural, Hollywood decreased the power of the hero. Then again, the class also agreed that if you throw enough humans at any one warrior, he could be "as bad as" *Beowulf*—so there's hope for Roland yet.

We continued our readings with John Gardner's *Grendel*, then other analogues and parodies—we read "Beowulf versus Godzilla," "Beowabbit," Gareth Hinds' comic, and we even viewed some of that rather questionable sci-fi shlock fest, *Beowulf 2000*, starring Christopher Lambert. Students then wrote their own take-offs, including such future classics as "My Date with Beowulf," "Pop' Goes the Grendel," and a wonderful version of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," based on a lone thane's escape from Heorot.

Following our short foray into matters derivative, we turned back to more scholarly pursuits, and read selections

from Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories." As with "The Monsters and the Critics," this essay required some in-class explication, but I think exploring the concepts of sub-creation and Tolkien's definition of "Fairy Story" was valuable, and gave the students a critical vocabulary with which to read and judge the texts. I do recommend having students read Tolkien according to Tolkien, as it were. There are very few writers who work both the critical and the creative as well as Tolkien, and it's a bit shocking for some students to see that you can use an author's own apparatus to take him apart.

Our last two weeks have been largely devoted to rereading, reanalyzing, writing and rewriting (final papers are due next week—I've already seen the drafts). We have a number of compare-and-contrast papers in the works, some more original than others, but all fairly well thought out. Some students are reading *The Hobbit* and *Beowulf* according to Tolkien's criteria for a Fairy Story, others are investigating the definitions of the hero, either as a social construct of the target audience, or as a product of the religious leanings of the author. One student is even tackling the tricky concept of intertextuality.

A pleasant surprise for me are two papers that deal with the "invisible" presence of Bilbo Baggins in Michael Crichton's *The Thirteenth Warrior*—a movie I had pitched as *only* a combination of *Beowulf* and Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*. Yet the students have a point—Ibn Fadlan as a Hollywood character owes more to Bilbo Baggins than to *Beowulf*, which goes to show that Hollywood has, perhaps unconsciously, had an eye on Tolkien for quite some time now.

And that brings us up to date, as far as this course is concerned. In short, teaching Tolkien on two fronts—the creative and the critical—has worked for me. Importantly, Tolkien the critic provides an access point to enter into more difficult Anglo-Saxon texts—even his own. Following our monster-driven discussions this semester, I like to think that my students have been able to look back at *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* as complementary texts, and many have formed their own, valid, critical readings from this understanding—and that's not a bad thing, especially in a freshman composition course.

Jeff Massey

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Abbreviated Syllabus: ENG 181: From Baggins to Beowulf: Reading Saxon Fictions

Class meets MWF for 40 minutes, about fourteen weeks. Relatively short class time generally requires a single focus per class. Hence, textual explication *or* writing, peer criticism *or* class discussion. Weeks are generally front-loaded for discussion of the text (reading assignments span weekends), and writing assignments follow on Wednesdays and Fridays. This also gives me time to read and grade over the weekends. Joy.

Week One:	<i>Hobbit</i> ch. I
Week Two:	<i>Hobbit</i> ch. I-VI: Dwarves, Trolls, Goblins and Gollum
Week Three:	<i>Hobbit</i> ch. VII-X: Wargs, Spiders, Elves, Beorn
Week Four:	<i>Hobbit</i> ch. XI-XIX: The Dragon
Week Five:	Tolkien's "The Monsters and the Critics"
Week Six:	<i>Beowulf</i> fit I-XVIII: Grendel
Week Seven:	<i>Beowulf</i> fit XIX-XXVII: Grendel's Dam
Week Eight:	<i>Beowulf</i> fit XXVIII-XLIII: The Dragon
Spring Break	—
Week Nine:	Ibn Fadlan's "Account of the Rus" and <i>The Thirteenth Warrior</i>
Week Ten:	John Gardner's <i>Grendel</i> and Other Modern Analogues
Week Eleven:	Creative Writing

Week Twelve: Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories"

Week Thirteen: Final Paper Workshops

Week Fourteen: Final Paper Workshops/Conferences

Week Fifteen: Final Paper Due

WORKS: *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Trans. R.M. Liuzza. 2000.

JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" and "On Fairy Stories"

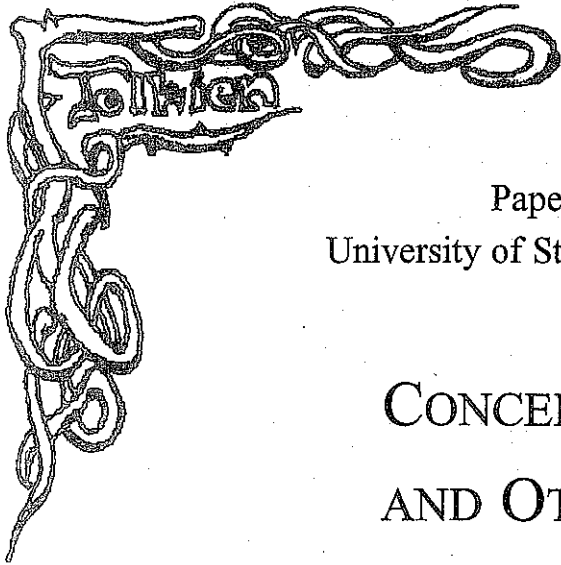
John Gardner's *Grendel*.

Beowulf comics: Gareth Hinds, Jerry Bingham, Uslan & Villamonte

The Thirteenth Warrior

Beowulf (2000)

Various short analogues, poems, parodies, etc.



Papers delivered at the
University of St. Thomas Tolkien conference

CONCERNING HOBBITS
AND OTHER MATTERS:
TOLKIEN ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

April 26th, 2001

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