

MARPUMGYFA, MÆGBURH, MEARCSTAPA: COLONIAL IDENTITY-BUILDING IN THE TEXT AND TREATMENT OF BEOWULF

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In the Old English translation of the Gospel according to Matthew, the word “genealogy” translates to *folctale*—literally, a story of a people.¹ Humanity has a long history of using the medium of fictional storytelling to convey factual information. Ostensibly, the practice has fallen out of fashion in contemporary academia, but it forms the foundation of what we today know as history. For people in the medieval past, folk legends could constitute historical fact: legendary ancestors legitimized claims to the throne and epic poems validated English tribal inclusion in Christendom.² In the incipient stages of the field of medievalism, English people looked to the same stories to try to build an ancestral national identity that aligned with the goals of the British imperial project. The imperial values and colonial mindsets they prioritized are encoded into our understandings of these historical texts, affecting the way people in the present conceive of Anglo-Germanic whiteness. The reception of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* presents an intriguing case study into the utility of historical literature in developing cultural and racial identity. Mindful of the ways in which it was used to legitimize colonial efforts, reading the poem through the

¹ Anlezark, Daniel. “Sceaf, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons,” *Anglo-Saxon England*, 31 (2002): 13-46.

² Anlezark, “Sceaf, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons,” 17.

lens of decolonial critical theory unveils significant parallels to more recent colonial thought. Another audience recognizes and celebrates those same parallels: white supremacists appropriate medieval history and literature, including *Beowulf*, to legitimize their genocidal agendas in similar ways as British imperialists did over a century before. Using decolonial theory to recognize and confront the ways in which colonialist thought appears in *Beowulf* enables us to question the assumed convictions that underpin the text and reframe the narrative in a way that problematizes Scylding expansionism, exonerates the monsters, and discovers a rallying cry of hope in the poem's traditionally bleak ending.

Initially conceived by Latin American scholars and adopted by global colonial subjects, decolonial theory is predicated on the idea that in the process of colonization, dominating forces establish epistemologies that push out the epistemologies of subjugated populations.³ In colonial and postcolonial societies, colonial epistemologies are taken as objective fact; they observe divinely ordained or empirical Truths about the world from a perspective allegedly free from bias. Santiago Castro-Gomez⁴ names that perspective the “zero-point-of-observation.” By instating a single version of Truth from the perspective of the zero-point-of-observation, colonial epistemologies can dismiss alternative epistemologies as heretical, primitive, and false. Walter D. Mignolo⁵ refers to this phenomenon as “coloniality of knowledge.” Decoloniality of knowledge, then, is the process of dislocating the zero-point-of-observation from the narrative—one part realizing that the narrators of history are not objective, situating them in their historical contexts, and identifying the biases in their observations, and another part re-centering the aforementioned marginalized epistemologies and honoring multiple, parallel, contradictory truths.

In the context of *Beowulf*, modern scholars have no marginalized epistemology to reinstate: the speaker of the poem makes no reference to the embodied culture of the Grendelkin, whose identity as other-than-colonizer exists solely in the context of their victimization by and conflict with colonial forces. However, the practice of identifying and interrogating how coloniality of knowledge manifests both within the text and in its historical and contemporary reception by readers offers insight into the utility of *Beowulf* as a tool of national and cultural identity-building. Many Indigenous scholars share perspectives on methods of knowledge accumulation and transmission that colonial academia discounts. Particular among these is the transmission of history through the medium of storytelling. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson ruminates on Nishnaabeg ways of knowing and being in her book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. She states, “The Seven Fires creation story confirmed to me [...] that everything we need to know about everything in the world is contained within Indigenous bodies [...] Nishnaabemwin itself is a continual generation and iteration of these stories and principles.”⁶ She goes on to juxtapose

³ Quijano, Aníbal. “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3 (2007): 168-178.

⁴ Castro-Gómez, Santiago. “Traditional Theory and Critical Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, vol 49, (2001): 139-154.

⁵ Mignolo, Walter D. “INTRODUCTION: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking,” *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3 (2007): 155-167.

⁶ Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 21.

Indigenous knowledge systems with academic standards of theory and research as basic pillars of colonial institutions that make and remake the oppressive power structures we observe today. Simpson recognizes that the line between fact and fiction is not such a strict binary as colonial academia would have it be, particularly when observing the embodied effects of nonfactual histories on group cultures. My analysis of *Beowulf* is predicated on the idea that the work of building identity through art and literature has as significant an impact on human events as the domain of historical fact.

Understanding the place of *Beowulf* in Anglophone cultural history requires contextualizing the history of its scholarship. Although Europeans have always considered the time period we think of as the Middle Ages in the reckoning of their history, a turning point in the materialization of medievalism as a field occurred during the reign of Queen Victoria in Great Britain. To wit, excerpts from *Beowulf* were translated and published for the first time ever in Sharon Turner's 1805 history, with the first complete Modern English translation by John Mitchell Kemble appearing in 1837. Since the 1830s, scholars have published a steady stream of translations, to the tune of multiple translations into Modern English per decade.⁷

The Victorian Era was a time of major nation-building—both at home and abroad. As the British Empire extended its sphere of dominion ever farther, interpolating a vast swath of peoples as subjects, the tenets of English national identity became a pressing question. With the scions of noble houses being born and raised abroad, while immigrants and emigrants alike passed over England's borders in numbers never before seen, what characteristics made someone English? With colonial powers enforcing English cultural practices worldwide, shifting in response to the new cultural environments to which they were exported, what constituted English behavior? A significant faction of scholars looked to the past, seeking historical records of a time before immigration and significant cross-cultural interchange, for hints to the inherent national character of the English people. They landed on the so-called "Anglo-Saxon" period, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and before the Norman Conquest, as the most pure progenitor of modern English civilization.

More sinister than the orphan's simple desire to know his parentage, however, the Victorian fascination with Anglo-Saxon culture aligned with the hegemonic goals of the British imperial project. Historian Reginald Horsman states it plainly: "A belief in Anglo-Saxon freedom, once used to defend popular liberties, had by the middle of the nineteenth century been transformed into a rationale for the domination of peoples throughout the world."⁸ With some of its early roots in the break with Roman Catholicism and the establishment of a Church of England, the idea of "Anglo-Saxon freedom" had long been a propagandistic basis for the justification of English superiority, as well as that of

⁷ *Beowulf's Afterlives Bibliographic Database*, Center of Digital Humanities Research, Texas A&M University (n.d.).

⁸ Horsman, Reginald, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37:3 (1976): 387-410.

other cultures of ancient Germanic descent.⁹ Will Abberley discusses how Victorian philologists equated commonalities in linguistic origin with commonalities in race,¹⁰ a marker of identity which was soaring to prominence as scholars passed around theories of evolution and cultural difference became more easily observable than ever before as the British Empire expanded. Horsman describes a related theory that, based on the cladogram of Indo-European language descent, posited an ancient Indo-European homeland, from whence the Germanic peoples traveled West, splitting into the ethnic groups we can trace through history. They carried with them the light of civilization, which they continued to spread, as much out of innate genetic impulse as magnanimity, to the savage peoples of the world through the tender auspices of the British Empire.¹¹

The retrospective culling of the national past did not stop at historical records and linguistic trends. From Tennyson to Tolkien, scholars drew on the literary traditions of the past to help construct a national identity. While few accepted such mythologized narratives as the King Arthur cycles as factual history, the medievalists of the Victorian Era drew on a similar intellectual tradition to the Nishnaabeg practice of transmitting communal identity and historical records through the medium of folklore. In the search for evidence of their national character, they wrote a genetic history through national legend. The Robin Hood of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* is a proud Saxon who fights for liberty from the oppressive Normans, modeling the so-called Anglo-Saxon freedom that the English claimed made them fit to subjugate other peoples. Tennyson's King Arthur will rise again, a new English Christ, and lead the nation to eternal prosperity—a prosperity that at present was manifesting from the global conquests of such modern national icons as the East India Tea Company.

This historical context spawns the scholarly discipline of medievalism. However much its motives have changed in the intervening century or so, the fact remains that the field was established with an intentional trajectory of validating Anglo-Germanic cultural supremacy on a global stage. With this in mind, contemporary scholars must revisit the canonical literature of the Middle Ages, rereading it with the knowledge that the scholars whose analyses form the basis of our understanding were reading these primary sources with the goals of justifying imperialism and inventing racially-charged categories of national identity.

The most influential contribution to the field of *Beowulf* scholarship to date is J. R. R. Tolkien's 1936 lecture entitled "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics."¹² In it, Tolkien argues for the value of the poem as a piece of art, rather than a historical document, and claims that readers should interpret the monster battles as metaphorical conflicts that reflect on the nature of humanity, rather than dismiss them as childish fantasy. The field has transformed significantly since Tolkien's criticism, and with it, the valuation of the *Beowulf* poem. Now,

⁹ Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," 389.

¹⁰ Abberley, Will, "Philology, Anglo-Saxonism, and National Identity" in *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford University Press, 2020): 6.

¹¹ Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," 393.

¹² Davis, Craig R. "Beowulf," *Oxford Handbooks Online* (2014): 1-22.

rather than an old epic whose fabulous elements distract from tidbits of factual history that meticulous philologists and linguists can glean from its verse, the poem is touted in high schools across the Anglophone globe as the wellspring of English literature.^{13, 14}

But like the fruits of English medievalism during Victoria's reign, Tolkien's *Beowulf* lecture is a product of its time as well as its author. Tolkien himself was born in colonial South Africa and fought in World War I before beginning his professional career at Oxford University.¹⁵ His medievalism and philology descend directly from the Victorian search for "Anglo-Saxon" national identity in the language and literature of the early Middle Ages. With Simpson's Nishnaabeg perspective in mind, Tolkien *was* reading *Beowulf* as a historical narrative: not one that conveys the particularities of dates, events, and individuals, but a genealogy of identity and thought. As such, this most influential interpretation of *Beowulf* comes from a perspective surrounded by unquestioning nationalism, in the contexts of both the height of British imperialism and the ravages of the Great War. As a colonial power, Britain conceived of itself as a guiding light of civilization and industry. In the context of the First World War, it was David to the Axis Powers' Goliath, haunted by the horrors of war and, by 1936, creeping inexorably towards another global-scale conflict.¹⁶ Like the Victorian medievalists, Tolkien sought a mirror for contemporary society in *Beowulf*, and his discovery—an exploration of the futility of human endeavors in a hostile universe bent towards entropy, and the cyclical corruption of violence even when undertaken towards honorable ends—rang true across generations of scholarship.

Now, nearly a century later, the story that resonated with Tolkien has lost a degree of relevance to the discussions in contemporary lecture halls. The perspective that the reader must assume in order to sympathize with the poem's protagonists rings alarm bells for a reader who has done work to recognize the covert biases that undergird life in present-day America. The arrival of a warlord on the shores of a new land, who seizes territory and power with all-out violence, calls to mind other conquering newcomers. An antagonist who resists the intrusion of a new political authority, characterized as an irredeemable, cannibalistic savage, reminds one of another group of people who, written off as violent primitives, were forced to surrender their sovereignty or die. Reading the relationship between the Scyldings and the Grendelkin in *Beowulf* as a microcosm of the interactions between colonizers and Indigenous colonial subjects is nothing new—Fabienne Michelet,¹⁷ Adam Miyashiro,¹⁸ and Catherine E. Karkov,¹⁹ to name but a few, have all made notable contributions with this idea in mind. However, I posit that with colonial power

¹³ Davis, "Beowulf," 8.

¹⁴ "Literature and Beowulf Background," *Beowulf*, Sparknotes.com, (n.d.).

¹⁵ Doughan, David. "J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biographical Sketch," The Tolkien Society (2021).

¹⁶ "A patriotic home front?" *Britain and the War* (Web). *The National Archives* (2014).
URL: nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/britain/patriotic_home.htm

¹⁷ Michelet, Fabienne. *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Miyashiro, Adam. "Homeland insecurity: Biopolitics and sovereign violence in *Beowulf*" *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 11:4 (2020): 384-395.

¹⁹ Karkov, Catherine E. *Imagining Anglo-Saxon England: utopia, heterotopia, dystopia* (The Boydell Press, 2020).

dynamics in mind, decolonial critical theory is a helpful lens through which to analyze how interpretations of *Beowulf*, as a pillar of “Anglo-Saxon” literature in contemporary America, may impact constructions of “Anglo-Saxon” identity in white supremacist contexts.

In the prologue and first section of *Beowulf*, the Scyldings’ conquest of the surrounding Scandinavian tribes is an act of colonial domination. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* colonialism involves dominance and subjugation along political-group lines, the dominant group’s control of the politics and economics of the subjugated group, and settlement and/or economic exploitation by the dominant group.²⁰ The introductory stanzas of *Beowulf*, which describe Scyld Scefing’s rise to power and the establishment of the Danish proto-kingdom, describe all of these factors:

Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches
from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls
[...]
until every one of the encircling nations
over the whale’s-riding had to obey him,
grant him tribute.²¹

Throughout the poem, mead-halls or “mead-benches” are synecdochic representations of distinct sociopolitical groups. Just as, later on, Heorot serves as a stand-in for the entire Danish proto-kingdom, the mead-benches of these other tribes represent their individual political territory and sovereignty. In taking control of their communal buildings, Scyld takes their independence and their powers of self-determination. The speaker refers to the other tribes as “troops of enemies”; however, Scyld himself initiates all the enmity between the tribes. The fabricated implication of a multi-sided conflict prevents the reader from condemning the actions of the power-hungry Scyldings. The echoes of colonial historiographical techniques in precolonial literature point to similarities in the goals of these parallel conquest movements: Benjamin Madley discusses a similar phenomenon, wherein colonizers in California and Oregon used Modoc resistance to the murder of their people as justification for both extrajudicial and state-sanctioned extermination campaigns.²² By specifying that Scyld “struck fear into earls,” the speaker undermines his later assertion that the amassed subjects in Heorot show fealty to the Scyldings of their own free will,²³ rather, they are loyal to the Scyldings because Scyld terrorized their forefathers into obedience. Scyld exercises dominance through the mode of warfare, emphasizing that Danish control over the surrounding tribes is predicated on violence, rather than peaceful means like treaties or marriage-pacts. In specifically proclaiming that he forced the other

²⁰ Kohn, Margaret and Kavita Reddy, “Colonialism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2017 edition): Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

URL:<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/colonialism/>

²¹ Liuzza, R.M. *Beowulf: second edition* (Broadview Editions, 2013), lines 4-11.

²² Madley, Benjamin. “California and Oregon’s Modoc Indians: How Indigenous Resistance Camouflages Genocide in Colonial Histories” in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Duke University Press, 2014), 96.

²³ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 22-24.

nations to both “obey him” and “grant him tribute,” the speaker makes explicit Scyld’s political and economic subjugation of the conquered states. Robbed of their sovereignty, the former tribes must not only acquiesce to the Scyldings’ political intentions, but also surrender their resources to their new overlords. Scyld’s great-grandson, Hrothgar, inherits the territories that Scyld conquered, and continues his rule over the surrounding tribes:

Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,
[...]
It came to his mind
that he should order a great hall-building,
have men made a great mead-house
which the sons of men should remember forever.
and there within he would share everything
with young and old that God had given him.²⁴

In attributing Hrothgar’s “success in war” to divine authority, the speaker absolves Hrothgar of his intentional work in carrying on the violence of his forefathers in conquering and exploiting the surrounding tribes. If the Scyldings’ success can be accredited to God’s will, their dominance must be divinely ordained, and therefore, morally correct. This assumption echoes that of the 1493 “Inter Caetera” bull issued by Pope Alexander VI, which grants the kings of Spain possession of all territories a hundred leagues west of the Azores with the understanding that they will convert the Indigenous people of those territories to Christianity.²⁵ Reference to the will of God to justify political governance and exploitation is another parallel that ties the Scyldings’ conquests to the colonial process in the New World. In the context of the poem, “everything [...] that God had given [Hrothgar]” can only refer to that which he has inherited from his forefathers and that which he has personally taken in battle: i.e., the resources of conquered tribes, whether taken as tribute or loot. Although the speaker frames the sharing of goods in Heorot as a magnanimous act, it reinforces the subjugated tribes’ dependence on the Danes for their economic survival, recalling the description of colonies in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as “dependent territor[ies].”²⁶ The violence with which Scyld conquers the other tribes, the continuing transgenerational control of their resources and populace, the exploitation of their resources through the practice of taking tribute, and the tribes’ dependence on the Danes for access to their appropriated resources cements the Danes as violent conquerors, rather than magnanimous agents of civilization.

Kohn and Reddy’s definition of colonialism, in its careful applicability to all colonial scenarios, does not specify what factors distinguish colonial domination from standard-fare conquest. The theory work of Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh fill in some of the gaps. Quijano identifies a colonial structure of power that codifies and naturalizes sociopolitical categories of humanity that become concepts like race, ethnicity,

²⁴ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 64-72

²⁵ Primary source translation via the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Resources, URL: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/T-04093.pdf>

²⁶ Kohn and Reddy, *Colonialism*, 1.

and nationality, which come to exist in the universalized colonial epistemology independent of political power structures.²⁷ Mignolo and Walsh dive further into colonial use of strategic redefinitions of humanity to control subjugated populations.²⁸ Because the surrounding tribes assimilate into the culture of the Danish proto-kingdom, their cultural differences from the colonizing powers vanish along with their Indigeneity. Patrick Wolfe discusses the violence of assimilation as it functions to eliminate what differentiates a marginalized population from a dominant group, a kind of genocide that he terms a “logic of elimination.”²⁹ However, the colonial manipulation of humanness is most evident in relation to those who do not assimilate. In the context of *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel represents that class of non-assimilators.

No sooner do the Scyldings establish their claim over the land and people with the building of Heorot than Grendel manifests to challenge their dominance. The speaker asserts that Grendel’s motivation is hatred of the Danes and their joy and accord within the hall:

[He] wretchedly suffered all the while,
for every day he heard the joyful din
loud in the hall
[...]
The ancient tale of the origin of men
[that] said that the Almighty created the earth.³⁰

The text suggests that Grendel’s malignant nature compels him to quarrel with the Scyldings: Grendel is a “fiend from hell,” an “unholy creature,” a “misbegotten thing”—the speaker identifies him as a descendant of Cain, for which God condemns him to a life of extrasocietal monstrosity.³¹ The speaker cites his motivation to attack the Danes as his displeasure with their songs about the Creation in Genesis, positioning his struggle against the Scyldings as part of a broader struggle against God and identifying his moral/political leanings as a symptom of his ancestry. By contrast, the speaker describes the Danes as a “lordly people,” whose music aligns them with God. By picking out the descendants of Cain as a separate, monstrous race of men, the Scyldings construct themselves as essentially, genetically superior to another class of people: favored by God, united against those born into iniquity. In establishing the two enemies as opposing due to their genealogy, the speaker suggests that Grendel is moved by a sort of proto-racism, jealous hatred towards those people whose ancestry allots them privilege over him.

The use of Biblical genealogies to justify the dehumanization and oppression of cultural others is intertwined with the history of racism, particularly as it manifests in the

²⁷ Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 168.

²⁸ Mignolo, Walter and Catherine Walsh. “The Invention of the Human and the Three Pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power: Racism, Sexism, and Nature,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), 153-176.

²⁹ Wolfe, Patrick. “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4 (2006): 387.

³⁰ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 87-92.

³¹ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 101-120.

colonization of the New World. To say nothing of the Hamitic hypothesis, it is important to acknowledge how Spanish colonizers used the theory of polygenism to try to legitimize their territorial claims to the New World. In his chapter in *The Origins of Racism in the West* Anthony Padgen cites Paracelsus's assertion that the Indigenous people of the Caribbean islands may not be descended from Adam, as well as the idea that some of his contemporaries adopted that those people who were not European, Asian, or African had developed spontaneously from rotting matter—a separate creation not facilitated by God.³² By placing Indigenous people in a non-human category, colonial powers could better justify their claims to land and resources in the New World—after all, non-human animals cannot own land or govern people. However, Padgen concludes, these theories were ultimately rejected because the stated goal of the colonial endeavor was to assimilate the Indigenous peoples into the Catholic kingdoms, thereby giving them a place in the course of human history.³³ Indeed, at the Valladolid debate of 1550-1551, Bartolomé de las Casas argued for the humanity of Indigenous peoples by referencing their rational souls, the inheritance of Adam.³⁴ It is telling that the rationale for treating other people humanely is the presumption of their common ancestry. Conversely, if humanity is predicated on Biblical ancestry, it is possible to designate entire races of people outcast or criminal based on what the Catholic majority decides is their Biblical parentage.

This intellectual process is reflected in *Beowulf*: those tribesmen who accept a role as tribute-givers to the Scyldings are fellow-men who are welcome in Heorot. However, Grendel chooses to resist assimilation, remaining outside of the new common Danish cultural entity. As such, in the Scyldings' conceptualization, there must be something in his genetic makeup that makes him other-than-human: an ancestor that God rejected. The protagonists' adoption of real-world intellectual justifications for racism and conquest in the fictional narrative of *Beowulf* lends insight into the development of early racist thought and how it manifests in discussions of personhood and politics.

The ancestry of Scyld Scefing represents a converse example. In his paper "Sceaf, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons," Daniel Anlezark analyzes "Anglo-Saxon" genealogies, looking at the attempts of early English people to trace their ancestry back to a Biblical progenitor. They felt that in order to understand their place in global history, they had to contextualize themselves within Christian epistemologies of the time, which involved claiming descent from one of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In brief, the theory goes that Shem fathered the Semitic peoples of Asia, the felonious Ham passed his crimes down to his descendants, the African peoples, and Japheth's children became the Europeans. While in some cases early English historiographers were content to lump themselves in with other European cultures and tie their ancestry to Japheth, some West Saxon accounts claimed exceptionalism, tracing their roots to a fourth, ark-born son: Scef.

³² Padgen, Anthony. "The peopling of the New World: ethnos, race, and empire in the early-modern world," in *The Origins of Racism in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 308.

³³ Padgen, "The peopling of the New World," 311.

³⁴ Hernandez, Bonar Ludwig. "The Las Casas-Sepúlveda Controversy: 1550-1551," *Ex Post Facto* 10 (2001): 95-104.

Sceaf in turn begat more local figures traditionally used to legitimize royal genealogies, often including characters like Bedwig, Heremod, and Hwala.³⁵ By syncretizing figures of both Christian and pre-Christian cultural significance in their lines of ancestry, early English people were able to link themselves to the inheritance of Adam and carve out a place for their culture to exist in broader Christian history.

The case of Sceaf presents a parallel to the question of the Biblical ancestry of Indigenous people, highlighting the disparity in treatment between the two groups. When early English people found no allusion to their existence in the Bible, they invented themselves a genealogy that both preserved their unique cultural heritage and legitimized them in the annals of Christian historiography. When Europeans learned of other groups of people whose existence was not explained in the Bible, they debated whether Indigenous people could even be human. The use of Biblical genealogies throughout history to legitimize claims to authority and belonging is a tool whose cutting edge always seems to strike those people whose oppression and exclusion is most profitable to its wielders.

In the text of *Beowulf*, Scyld Scefing washes ashore an orphan: he has no familial ties to wealth or power.³⁶ What he does have is the name of his father: Scef, the ark-born son that links early English people to Biblical heritage. Scyld, son of Scef, is the founder of the new Danish proto-kingdom; he is the ancestor of the West Saxon kings and the heroic archetype after which they fashion themselves. When early English people heard the story of *Beowulf*, they surely recognized that they were to model themselves after its protagonists. But more than that, the evidence in Anlezark's genealogies suggests that they believed themselves to be the living legacy of Scyld Scefing, carrying on his bloodline and his conquests against the oblivion of *nyrd*.

Grendel's actions, contrary to the crude racialized vitriol of which the poem's speaker accuses him, indicate a more political motive. He has lived in these territories since before the Scyldings established their kingdom—on the strength of that description alone, Catherine Karkov describes the Grendelkin as “the [I]ndigenous inhabitants of the land.”³⁷ For the duration of his life, Grendel “waited in darkness,”³⁸ apparently bothering nobody, until the completion of Heorot. His lack of violence prior to Heorot's existence indicates that he had no issue with the tribal order before Scyld's conquest. Once the Scyldings build Heorot, Grendel attacks only those who sleep in the hall: the speaker specifies that “then it was easy to find a thane / who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away, / a bed in the outbuildings.”³⁹ If Grendel is intent on hunting the Scyldings to extinction or driving the people out of the land, the few dozen yards that separate the fortified hall from the smaller, unprotected outbuildings could not possibly stop him. By keeping his violence to Heorot, Grendel sends a clear statement: he protests specifically what the hall represents. Heorot is the site of colonial domination via distribution of the tribute that the Scylding kings demand

³⁵ Anlezark, “Sceaf, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons,” 13-46.

³⁶ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 6-7.

³⁷ Karkov, *Imagining Anglo-Saxon England*, 170.

³⁸ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, line 86.

³⁹ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 138-140.

and the loot that the Scylding warriors seize. It is the apparatus through which they maintain economic control over the tribes they have conquered. In addition, Heorot's function as a mead-hall where people sing and drink together highlights the hall's capacity to serve as a site of dual culture-building and cultural erasure, where the conquered tribes assimilate into the broader Danish cultural entity, led and facilitated by the Scylding kings. In short, Heorot is a manifestation of the new sociopolitical order that the Scyldings impose on the land, and which Grendel opposes.

Adam Miyashiro draws in Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer* to analyze the biopolitical significance of the Grendelkin to Scylding society.⁴⁰ Agamben's concept originates in Roman law: a *homo sacer* was an outlaw, who could be killed by anybody, but was considered sacred, and thereby could not be sacrificed in religious rituals. In Agamben's work, the *homo sacer* is a category of being who is not human enough to enforce or help make law (i.e., to have a political life), but is subject to the law and lawmakers. Mark Rifkin⁴¹ and Scott Lauria Morgensen⁴² each discuss different facets of the way that the process of colonialism forced Indigenous Americans into a *homo sacer* category, where colonizers worked simultaneously to bring them under control of colonizers' law and towards their elimination—within the political order, but only in a capacity to be explicitly excluded from it.

Miyashiro identifies Grendel as a similar political entity: a *mearcstapa*, or border-stepper, who exists on the border between man and beast, both inside and outside of society (386). Although Grendel could be said to have inherited his *homo sacer/mearcstapa* status from his progenitor Cain, who was marked by God to both outlaw him and protect him from harm, the Scyldings offer Grendel a route to inclusion. But Grendel will not entertain the idea: “[He never] ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money, / nor did any of the counselors need to expect / bright compensation from the killer's hands.”⁴³ It is possible for Grendel to attain human status according to the Scyldings only if he participates in the monetary transactions that will cement his place in the hierarchy of domination and subjugation that the Scyldings bring about. If he pays *wergild*, compensating the Scyldings for the monetary value of the men he has killed, his crimes will be forgiven. If he accepts tribute from them as a bribe to stop the killing, he becomes their new king, his violence now in the same valorous class as Scyld Scefing's. In short: if he assimilates into the Scyldings' economic and political system, he can become human by their standards.

Indigenous Americans in the earlier centuries of colonialism faced a similar ultimatum. Patrick Wolfe sums it up concisely: “have our settler world, but lose your Indigenous soul.”⁴⁴ The only route to peace with colonizers—Scylding or American—is through the disappearance of Indigeneity, either through death or through the total

⁴⁰ Miyashiro, “Homeland Insecurity,” 384-395.

⁴¹ Rifkin, Mark. “Indigenizing Agamben: Rethinking Sovereignty in Light of the ‘Peculiar’ Status of Native Peoples,” *Cultural Critique*, 73 (2009): 88-124.

⁴² Morgensen, Scott Lauria. “The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now,” *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1:1 (2011): 52-76.

⁴³ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, 156-158.

⁴⁴ Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” 397.

forfeiture of sovereignty and difference, adopting colonizer laws and lifeways instead. The colonizer's logic manifests in an 1892 quote from Captain Richard H. Pratt, a self-proclaimed "Friend of the Indian," as he describes his plan to institute residential schools to isolate Indigenous children from their families and cultures, forcing them to adopt white American language, dress, religion, and behavior: "all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."⁴⁵ Scholars who work with reference to Indigenous experiences have long theorized the essential violence of assimilation as a colonial tool. In a chapter from their forthcoming book, Manuela Picq and Andrew Canessa discuss Indigeneity as a relational category: one that only exists with reference to settler colonialism. The vast diversity of people who lived in wildly different, sometimes warring societies in the Americas prior to European arrival had no unified Indigenous identity until European colonizers grouped them into a monolith of people who existed outside the colonizing polity.⁴⁶ With the ideas that Wolfe elucidates about assimilation as a kind of death in mind, Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel define Indigenous identity as resistance to the colonial state, which works to dispossess and dehumanize the cultural others who lived on the land prior to colonial invasion.⁴⁷ Thinking with reference to these frameworks of identity, because of his struggle against Danish sociopolitical dominance as represented by Heorot and his further refusal to take tribute or pay *vergild*, Grendel represents the only polity that can be defined as Indigenous in relation to the conquering Scyldings.

The counter-argument to be made, of course, is the very one the speaker presents: in Heorot hall, the tribesmen who were once at war could sit at the mead-benches as allies, ending centuries of cyclical conflict and ushering the people from a primitive tribal age to a time of culturally rich monarchy. The speaker discusses Scyld's heir, who cements his dynastic rule, saying, "God sent [him] / as a solace to the people — he saw their need, / the dire distress they had endured, lordless / for such a long time."⁴⁸ The Scyldings' role in history is as a centralizing force: under their dominion, there is one leader, one people. The speaker links the Scylding dynasty to the Christian God in the same breath: their mono-authority goes hand in hand with monotheism. Picq identifies this "oneness of authority" as a hallmark of co-constitutive colonialism and modernity.⁴⁹ In their chapter in *On Decoloniality*, Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh expand on this concept, pointing out an epistemological shift around the time of the Enlightenment towards the adoption of universal binary oppositions—true vs. false, human vs. nonhuman, etc.—with the new search for Truth through empirical questioning. They assert that these oppositional

⁴⁵ Pratt, Capt. Richard H. *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46–59. Reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 260–271.

⁴⁶ Picq, Manuela and Andrew Canessa. *Savages, Citizens, and Sodomites: Indigenous Peoples and the State from Thomas Hobbes to Evo Morales* (forthcoming), 46.

⁴⁷ Alfred, Taiaiake and Jeff Corntassel. "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism," *Government and Opposition*, 40:4 (2005): 597.

⁴⁸ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 14–16.

⁴⁹ Picq, Personal communication, 29 Oct. 2021.

structures privilege one system, one group, one way of being, over all others, with their goal being the elimination of incorrect or contradictory ways of being. It is this mindset that brings about the eliminatory violence of the so-called Age of Exploration and the colonization of the New World.⁵⁰

In his 2007 article “Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking,” Mignolo names one of the ideological pillars of colonial thinking: “the assumption that there is no modernity without coloniality, the coloniality is constitutive of modernity [...] while modernity is presented as a rhetoric of salvation, it hides coloniality, which is the logic of oppression and exploitation.”⁵¹ Mignolo’s observation urges us to question whether or not whatever sociocultural improvements colonialism has allowed us to make are adequate justification for colonial violence. We make the same assumption when we adopt the protagonists’ triumphalist perspective in *Beowulf*. Reading from a decolonial perspective, however, we question whether the Scyldings’ comparative intertribal peace justifies the subjugation, assimilation, and extraction of both human and material resources from the surrounding tribes. Rejecting the idea that modernity is either necessary or a justification for colonialism not only allows us to mourn the violence and suffering of the colonial past and present unconditionally, but also gives us the opportunity to imagine a radically different future, independent from the trappings of contemporary colonial modernity.

The end of *Beowulf* presents a singularly bleak theme: that all human efforts are ultimately futile, the last of every race is to be killed off and forgotten someday and every hard-won treasure destined to mold undergound. Craig Davis identifies this grim fate as the underlying principle behind the idea of *nyrd*, frequently translated as “fate,” a universal and inevitable force of entropy.⁵² It is against this principle that the Scylding kings act: hoping to delay their eventual fate, they steamroller their enemies and hand down their histories in their mead-halls. The Scyldings enact their colonial practices to facilitate the other tribes’ meetings with *nyrd* in order that the Scyldings themselves do not face it.

The monsters in *Beowulf* represent the purportedly universal human flaws that assure our eventual meeting with *nyrd*. The speaker characterizes Grendel as a manifestation of violence fueled by ethnic hatred. But as we have seen, Grendel acts in protest against violent Danish political hegemony, not Danish people: the colonial project’s own sociopolitical trespasses inspire his violence. Grendel’s mother appears to avenge the killing of her son, following the old adage that mandates taking a life for a life. The most sympathetic monster in the poem, she plays by the same rules that the Scyldings do. In killing her, Beowulf only replicates the cyclical feud dynamics that she represents, ensuring they continue into the Danish proto-kingdom. Finally, the dragon that Beowulf fights fifty years down the line only awakens and begins to ravage the countryside when a thief steals a treasure from his hoard. He represents the overpowering greed for gold that inspires the conquest of tribes and draws war-bands to a leader. Beowulf and the dragon annihilate each other, and the story

⁵⁰ Mignolo and Walsh. “The Invention of the Human and the Three Pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power,” 153-176.

⁵¹ Mignolo, “INTRODUCTION,” 162.

⁵² Davis, “Beowulf,” 5.

ends with a Geatish woman wailing in anguish, knowing the Geats are bound for destruction without their heroic leader.⁵³ The dragon represents how the pursuit of material wealth is a path to ruin. Proto-racism, cyclical inherited violence, and greed are the components that ensure the inevitable failure of human endeavors: the meeting of every person with *nyrd*.

However, although these monsters plague the Scyldings and Geats, they are by no means essential to human society. The character of Grendel, in his refusal to assimilate into Scylding society, represents an alternative. He maintains strict boundaries in his warfare against the Danes, enacting violence only within Heorot in order to send a clear message against Scylding sociopolitical hegemony, rather than working to destroy the people as a whole. He does not engage in blood feuds and he shuns gold, refusing to partake in tribute-taking or giving *vergild*. Grendel stands as an example of how the inevitable destruction of peoples that the speaker describes is a result of colonial actions, not a base state of humanity.

In addition, the theme of inevitable *nyrd* reflects a cultural anxiety surrounding the idea of vanishing and a preoccupation with prolonging the lifespan of a people. It is for this reason that the stories of heroes like Beowulf live on. As in the case of the West Saxon nobility and their ancestor Scaef, these stories establish the continuity of a bloodline or people, and impress upon their audiences the necessity of preserving that people.

Though certainly not unique to the Scyldings' proto-empire, incorporating the practice of forced assimilation into the narrative lends a distinctly colonial bent to the story. Rather than simply maintaining their existence, the Scyldings' focus is on expansion and absorption. Even their allies the Geats are not safe: after Beowulf disposes of Grendel, Hrothgar adopts Beowulf as his own son.⁵⁴ Hrothgar's wife's concern for her own sons' inheritance after this move gives it legitimacy: no empty gesture of goodwill, Hrothgar has actually brought the Geatish royal heir into the Scylding line of succession. Literally and symbolically, the Scyldings take all people with whom they come into contact under their aegis.

The Scyldings' refusal to let external polities exist without eliminating or subsuming them calls to mind the colonial notion of the artificial binary between dominance and extinction. In his article "The Myth of the Vanishing Indian," Brewton Berry quotes "a prominent South Carolina statesman [who] declared in 1717, 'We must assist them in cutting one another's throats. This is the game we intend to play if possible... for if we cannot destroy one nation of Indians by another, our country must be lost.'"⁵⁵ The colonizer's logic states that the mere existence of another people who are not under colonial control threatens the colonial polity. A colonial society can exist while exercising total hegemonic domination, or it cannot exist at all; coexistence with cultural others is impossible. Berry goes on to quote Charles Darwin, saying, "Wherever the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal. [...] The varieties of man seem to act on each other in the same way as

⁵³ Davis, "Beowulf," 1.

⁵⁴ Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 1175-1187.

⁵⁵ Berry, Brewton. "The Myth of the Vanishing Indian." *Phylon* 21:1 (1960): 52.

different species of animals—the stronger always extirpating the weaker.”⁵⁶ Darwin and the *Beowulf* speaker both speak as if their thoughts are self-evident truths about the nature of the universe, rather than subjective observations based on their unique cultural perspectives—that is, they speak from a zero-point-of-observation. However, the phenomenon that Darwin describes of Europeans wiping out Indigenous peoples is a goal of colonial and imperial projects, not a universal fact of human existence, and the *Beowulf* speaker’s morose truism that all peoples will bring one another to ruin necessitates participation in a culture bent on domination and greed.

This distinctly colonial mindset is evident in contemporary narratives surrounding cultural vanishing, particularly in white supremacist circles. The Anti-Defamation League unpacks the “white genocide” conspiracy, which is based on the myth that the so-called white race is dying out due to the growth of non-white populations and the idea of “forced assimilation” into non-white cultures. They link it to what they cite as the most popular global white supremacist slogan: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”⁵⁷ Central to this conspiracy theory is the idea that the existence of cultural others, in threatening white dominance, threatens white existence wholesale: the same false binary between dominance and extinction.

The white genocide myth manifests in many instances of white supremacist action, including the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The amassed racists chanted, “You will not replace us,” alluding to the prevalent theory of a global conspiracy to “replace” white people with unspecified cultural others.⁵⁸ The theme of the rally, broadly speaking, was the assertion of “white power” against an imagined threat of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and destruction. Another notable facet of the Unite the Right rally was the prevalence of medieval imagery among the protestors.^{59, 60, 61, 62} The use of medieval-inspired imagery as mascots for white nationalism points to the function of medievalism in efforts to generate a historical lineage for whiteness. The association of this historical lineage with the white genocide/replacement myths displays the propagandistic idea that medievalism represents a marginalized people and an erased cultural history of whiteness.

White supremacists tie their myth of a vanishing white society into Indigenous history in order to legitimize their conspiracies in contemporary discourse. Kalen Goodluck

⁵⁶ Berry, “The Myth of the Vanishing Indian,” 53.

⁵⁷ “Defining Extremism: A Glossary of White Supremacist Terms, Movements, and Philosophies,” *Anti-Defamation League* (n.d.): 15.

⁵⁸ “White Supremacists Adopt New Slogan: ‘You Will Not Replace Us,’” *Anti-Defamation League* (June 9, 2017).

⁵⁹ Kim, Dorothy. “Teaching Medieval Studies in the Time of White Supremacy.” *In the Medieval Middle* (blog). Aug. 20, 2017.

⁶⁰ “Deconstructing the symbols and slogans spotted around Charlottesville,” *The Washington Post* (Aug. 18, 2017).

⁶¹ Fahey, Richard. “Marauders in the US Capitol: Alt-Right Viking Wannabes and Weaponized Medievalism.” *Medieval Studies Research Blog: Meet Us at the Crossroads of Everything*(blog). *University of Notre Dame’s Medieval Institute*. Jan. 15, 2021.

⁶² Lomuto, Sierra. “Public Medievalism and the Rigor of Anti-Racist Critique,” *In the Middle: peace love & the middle ages* (blog). Apr. 04, 2019.

tracks the phenomenon in a 2019 article for the High Country News. He cites numerous iterations of the phenomenon, from right-wing extremists justifying anti-immigrant violence by pointing to the genocide of Indigenous Americans as a prior case of unchecked immigration, to a white supremacist mass murderer urging those who share his sentiments to shift away from Nazi talking points and towards Indigenous rights buzzwords so as to more effectively garner social support.⁶³ By invoking a history of suppression and disenfranchisement, white supremacists posit the purported return to a theoretical ancestral past as an objective moral imperative, rather than a political action.

Narratives like *Beowulf* are instrumental in characterizing that ancestral past: the neo-Nazi online forum Stormfront, which as of 2015 boasted over 300,000 accounts,⁶⁴ lists the poem as essential reading for insight into a mythic white warrior past.⁶⁵ The white supremacists reading *Beowulf* engage in the same work that the Victorians did when they looked to early English history: they are searching for precursors to themselves, finding analogues for their contemporary genocidal agendas in the Scyldings and Geats of the legendary past.

We base our contemporary identities on those we think of as our ancestors, creating for ourselves a cultural lineage that we make a part of ourselves. Literary history is as much a part of that cultural ancestry as factual chronologies are. Threatened by the new sense of globalism as the British Empire expanded, English scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries matched their values and principles to their interpretations of Anglo-Saxon culture, thereby crystallizing their contemporary senses of nationalism and imperial thought in medievalist scholarship. Tolkien's ensuing work on *Beowulf* cemented it as the proverbial fount of English literature, a cornerstone of the Anglophone cultural history upon which successive generations base their understanding of Anglo-Germanic history. Today, looking at *Beowulf* without acknowledging the role that Anglo-Saxonism has played in the formation of white English and American identity makes it easy to avoid the parallels in the text to the same kind of colonial thought and praxis that was the impetus behind the oppressive expansion of the British Empire and the genocide of Indigenous people on the American frontier. The ostracization of a certain kind of people based on their ancestry calls to mind Enlightenment-era racisms. The systematic gate-keeping of a sociopolitical category of humanity contingent on assimilation into the dominant culture recalls ultimata colonizers presented to Indigenous Americans.

Contemporary white supremacists recognize and embrace these parallels, using them to fuel their efforts to create a mythic homeland for whiteness. We can dismiss the prevalence of medieval language and imagery in white supremacist circles as ignorant misappropriation, or we can confront it at its source. The entire field of medievalism has its roots in identifying the fictional actors of the distant past with our present selves as we

⁶³ Goodluck, Kalen. "Far-right extremists appropriate Indigenous struggles for violent ends," *High Country News*, Aug. 27, 2019.

⁶⁴ "Stormfront," *Extremist Files*, *Southern Poverty Law Center*. (n.d.).

⁶⁵ Rambaran-Olm, Mary. "Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia, and White Supremacy," *M. Rambaran-Olm* (blog). *Medium*. June 27, 2018.

construct cultural and genetic histories of Anglo-Germanic whiteness. We cannot write off the pseudo-histories which fuel white supremacist conspiracies as anachronisms that have nothing to do with us. We have a responsibility to read between the lines, to question those who write our histories, both factual and fictional, and to analyze how their unique perspectives and agendas morph their accounts.

The ultimate theme of *Beowulf* is a sense of resignation to an inevitable universal doom—but only if we take the poem’s speaker at their word. Looking at the text from outside of the speaker’s colonial perspective, we realize that this inevitable *nyrd* hinges on the espousal of the greed and ethnocentrism characteristic of colonial epistemologies, from the Scyldings in medieval Scandinavia to the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville. The figure of Grendel, an Indigenous precursor and outsider to Scylding society, represents an alternative to the colonial tautology that states that cultural others must be absorbed or killed. He resists Scylding domination, rather than Scylding existence, modeling a way forward against colonial hegemonies. The case of Grendel demonstrates that by applying decolonial critical theory to literary mainstays, it is possible to pinpoint tenets of colonial thought both as they appear in the literature and in our everyday lives. In noticing, questioning, and disrupting the colonial assumptions we have internalized as essential to our identities and our understandings of the world, we empower ourselves to envision and work towards the redress of colonial harms.

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