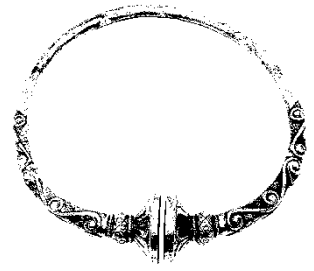## The Torc and the Text: Ambiguity in *Beowulf*
Brandon Spun

This research surveys thematic and structural elements of *Beowulf* by means of analyzing correspondences between the poem and a torc. A common artifact of the ancient and medieval world, a torc is a ring borne about the neck, often open in the front and accented by termini at either end.[1] It functions as an ornament, as a symbol of status, of social realities, as well as an image of freedom and glory. Yet interpreted under the lens of differánce, the object simultaneously evokes a series of binary others, exposing traces of the anti-social, thralldom, futility, and death. Implicit ambiguity in *Beowulf* comes to light in the like ambiguity of the ornament.

Likeness between the ornament and *Beowulf* suggests that the poem is self-consciously interacting with and deconstructing values and sources of an earlier Anglo-Saxon period. The poem may also critique its own era.[2] The poet is enabled through the distance of faith and time to set the poem in the full, honest relief of futility. In doing so, the narrative interrogates glory by its more terrible twin, the baffling and indomitable darkness of death.

This paper is divided into four parts. A preliminary section surveys the theoretical sources of this reading. An exploration of the torc follows. After which, the paper will examine ambiguity in the Anglo-Saxon polis which mimics the nature of the torc. Finally, the overarching torc-shaped narrative will be read through the dual termini of glory and futility.

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[1] While the term 'torc', French in origin, is anachronistic, the object and idea expressed in the term (twisting) is not, and is consonant with academic usage. For an excellent account of the torc see Christiane Eluère, "Celtic Gold Torcs," *Gold Bulletin* 20 (1987): 23-37. Both bracelets and necklaces appear in *Beowulf.*

[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." In *Beowulf, A Verse Translation.* Trans. By Seamus Heaney. Edited by Daniel Donoghue (Norton Critical Editions 2002), 103-130.

A. Ambiguity of Language

This paper can be described as an attempt to flesh out of J.R.R Tolkien's understanding of *Beowulf* through the hermeneutic lens of deconstruction and the playful analysis of a social ornament. Before exploring the nature of the ornament (the torc), this section briefly explains how deconstruction provides a framework for an analysis of ambiguity.

'Up' is neither said nor thought without its binary opposite, 'down'. Each is a generative source of its other. This is part of Claude Lévi-Strauss's thesis in *Raw and the Cooked*, in which he argues that binaries (such as the 'raw' and the 'cooked') not only accompany one another conceptually, but emerge simultaneously. Following upon this, Derrida, in *Structure, Sign, and Play* claims that all concepts are entrapped in a matrix of binary opposition which both limits and complicates signification. Because we communicate through signs, he concludes that all signification remains open to play. This is the result of binaries which although suppressed are 'present' as trace.

It is not the point of this paper to advocated either Lévi-Strauss's structuralism or Derrida's deconstruction as a totalizing theory. Rather, it is to show how similar considerations may have influenced the author of *Beowulf*. First, in the self-conscious interweaving of thematic binaries. Second, based on the first, in the in narrative's use of these binary elements to implicitly critique itself. In this manner, the poet functions as the bricoleur of Lévi-Strauss's *Savage Mind.* A bricoleur creatively employs preexistent motifs, stories, and themes to new effect. Derrida describes the phenomena in *Structure, Sign, and Play*:

> The bricoleur… uses "the means at hand," that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used…There is therefore a critique of language in the form of bricolage"[3]

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[3]Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play." In *Writing and Difference*. (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 351-370. Derrida immediately clarifies that he believes a transcendent Engineer/Bricoleur to be a "myth."

In *Beowulf,* the critique is subtly realized. Social and metaphysical aspects of Viking society are artfully intertwined. The poet critiques, not through satire or rejection, but in narrating the heroic alongside its binary other, thereby temporizing and complicating the subject. Utilizing material from the heroic tradition, the poem links social stability with social violence, and interrogates glory in terms of death and futility. In doing so, the poem presents an elegiac aspect.[4] It exposes elements of opposition already present in Anglo-Saxon culture, albeit as trace. The torc, an open circle formed by and sustained by force, embodies this critique.

This idea of appropriation and bricolage is not new to *Beowulf* scholarship. Stanley Greenfield discusses this idea in the preface of his translation of *Beowulf*, as do Robert Bjork and Pauline Head in their surveys of *Beowulf* scholarship.[5] But it is J.R.R. Tolkien in "*The Monsters and the Critics*" who codified this concept in the image of the poem as a tower built from stones formed long before for different purposes.[6] Tolkien suggests it is necessary to see, not only the original material, but "what the poet did with it," that is, how the poet makes something new.[7]

> Beowulf is not a 'primitive' poem; it is a late one, using the materials (then still plentiful) preserved from a day already changing and passing, a time that has now forever vanished, swallowed in oblivion; using them for a new purpose.[8]

The rest of this paper is a playful attempt to illuminate the "new purpose" of the poem. This is taken up next in the image of a torc.

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[4] Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 127.

[5] Stanley B. Greenfield, and Alain Renoir. A Readable Beowulf: The Old English Epic Newly Translated. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982. xiii-xv. Cf. Bjork, Robert E., ed. and Niles, John D., ed. "A Beowulf Handbook." University of Nebraska Press. 1998. 149-174; Head, Pauline E. Representation and Design: Tracing a Hermeneutics of Old English Poetry. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. 89-112

[6] Ibid., 105-118.

[7] Ibid., 107.

[8] Ibid., 129.

B. Ambiguity of the Torc

The structure of *Beowulf* has been described as pleated, interlaced, woven, chiastic, double, and ringed.[9] These interpretations, identifying formal and thematic structures within the poem, rightly designate it as one "of design."[10] For instance, John Leyerle, who describes *Beowulf* as interlaced, likens it to the intersecting patterns of a Celtic knot.[11] The interlace motif, a formal poetic structure, produces the effect of drawing attention to points of intersection.[12] These points of intersection are understood in this paper as the junctures of thematic binaries. This paper presents the torc as an analogue to the structure of the poem, translating Leyerle's intersections onto the windings of the torc.[13] Further, the torc is itself an independent figure, not merely an adorning pattern. The complete shape of the torc will be useful therefore in giving an account of the whole of *Beowulf*, illuminating the poem's overarching ambiguity.

As Morphic Object

Circular ornaments including rings, bracelets, and necklaces are found throughout the ages of human history.[14] From the perfect circles of ancient Greek Cosmology, to the biblical sea of bronze (2nd Kings 16), from the Mayday pole, to the passage about the Kaaba, the circular has played a central role in human affairs. Its enigmatic properties, its theological significance, its

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[9] See Bibliography: Bartlett, 1935; Kroll, 1986; Leyerle, 1967; Niles, 1979; Rosier, 1977; Tolkien, 1936; Tonsfeldt, 1977. This kind of reading has been challenged, as noted in by Bjork and Niles, 1998 (page 122).

[10] Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 110-111.

[11] John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*." In *Beowulf, A Verse Translation.* Trans. By Seamus Heaney. Edited by Daniel Donoghue (Norton Critical Editions 2002), 130-152. Leyerle depicts text as a linguistic analogue to the act of weaving.

[12] Ibid., 138, 140, 145-146, 150-152. He specifically connects the elegiac aspect of *Beowulf* with these intersections.

[13] The word 'torc' is anachronistic and of French origin. There are multiple kinds of 'rings' in *Beowulf*. This paper focuses not on the use of torc necklaces in the poem, but of the correspondences between such artifacts (which are present in *Beowulf*) and the nature of the poem itself.

[14] Bouzouggar, A., et. al. "82,000-Year-Old Shell Beads…,"in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2007, 964-969; See this paper's bibliography for further related works.

role in engineering, organization, and logic, are intuitively grasped. Yet a torc, open at one end, is not a perfect circle, but penannular.[15]

An open circle is permeable; it can be entered or exited. It is accepting, but also vulnerable. It may describe a threatening aperture, or warm embrace; a point of weakness, or a point of access. And because it is open or 'incomplete', it evokes the longing for closure as described in Gestalt psychology. It invites one to complete the shape in a participatory act.

As product of Craft

Unlike necklaces which are made by simply tying ends of string together, a torc requires craft, wealth, and all that is recognized as culture. More significantly, it requires a violent forging of material which will retain a form, which will *bend to* a purpose. The term 'torque' means to twist, and such is the sense attributed to these ornaments.[16] They are often 'torqued' or twisted in more than one way. Of course, the ornament is twisted or bent in a circular-linear fashion, but the metal may also be twisted in a screw-like manner, in which case, layers of strength and beauty are formed which give way to one another in an enactment of binary opposition through negative and positive space.[17]

The material of a torc is torn from the darkness of the earth. These materials then encounter fire, air, water, and human force in the process of fabrication. When complete, they are a thing set apart from that wilderness from which they were first wrought. Still, the penannular shape refuses a full separation. Like all culture, society, and civilization, it must continually withstand the forces which might instigate a return to the wilderness.[18]

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[15] Not every torc is penannular, but this is the form focused on in this paper (see Appendix).
[16] Cf. footnote 1
[17] See Appendix for examples, particularly Images A, F, G, & H.
[18] One might explore the relation of the wild (Grendel's environ, the Ocean, etc.) and the civilized embodied by language, setting, theme and character in *Beowulf*. The circular plays a role in both the wild (the roiling,

As Social 'Thing'[19]

As a social symbol, a torc elegantly reflects the duality inherent in society. All society is formed in contrast to some other. To be within (or without) a circle implies social identity. Such is illustrated in *Outwitted*, a short poem by 19th century poet Edwin Markham.

> He drew a circle that shut me out-
> Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
> But love and I had the wit to win:
> We drew a circle and took him in. [20]

In the poem, a circle creates social boundaries and values simultaneously. Friend and foe concurrently emerge in binary opposition. Self-definition is here bound to definition of the *other*.

Society is a circle around which people gather, a source of light and vitality, but it is not a static or self-sufficient reality. It requires allegiance, commitment, sacrifice, and conformity. Just as the torc invites a participatory act of closure, so too does society. The torc represents both the stability of the social circle, and that circle's dependence upon those who will give themselves to holding the line. The warrior who is honored by such an ornament is the embodiment of one who is committed to keeping the circle unbroken. Such warriors are eminently free, and yet bind themselves to social custom. Seamus Heaney describes them as "*hooped* within the great *wheel* of necessity, in thrall to a code of loyalty and bravery."[21] They voluntarily commit themselves to being forged into a structure which ensures social stability.[22] Yet, as *Beowulf* bares out, such a hoop can be broken.[23] Because the torc is penannular, it is open to the *other* and implicitly

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serpentine, coiled, and inchoate) as well as the civilized. Torcs (hrings and beags) embody both. The Old English refers to a dragon as a coiled or ringed 'wyrm'. Heaney hints at the significance of this in his introduction when he compares 'wyrm' and 'wyrd', and also in referring to the Viking thralldom to a *hoop* of necessity.

[19] This paper is prepared for a panel at the 51st Annual Medieval Conference at Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2016. The panel is titled "'Things' in Medieval Literature," led by Holly Ledbetter, University Michigan.

[20] Edwin Markham. "Outwitted" in *The Shoes of Happiness and Other Poems* (Doubleday, NY 1913), 1.

[21] Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2000), XIV.

[22] Cf. Kroll, Norma. 1986. ""Beowulf": The Hero as Keeper of Human Polity". *Modern Philology* 84 (2). The University of Chicago Press: 117–29. http://www.jstor.org/stable/437569.

[23] Ibid., lines 840-1160; 2596-2660; 2813-2816.

critiques social stability and values. It is a reminder of that which elements and threatens the social.

As Historical Artifact

A history of the torc and of torc-like bare out the above interpretation. The British Museum possesses a number of early torcs which they date from as early as 14th century BC.[24] Similar ornaments have been attributed to numerous people groups, including the Ancient Celts, Romans, Gauls, Scythians, Greeks, and Anglo-Saxons. "The wearing of torcs… is something by no means confined to the Celtic world" [25] While often associated with male warriors, they are not exclusively or especially a masculine ornament.[26] Their history reflects the ambiguity which this paper attributes to them, briefly illustrated in three cases: an Iron-Age inhumation; Viking slavery; and the West-African Manilla.

In Great Houghton, Northampton, England, an Anglo-Saxon cemetery was found to contain the remains of a woman between 30 and 40 years old.[27] She had probably been bound, possibly buried alive, either as punishment or sacrifice.[28] Oddly, she bore a large torc about her neck. Miranda Aldhouse Green describes such ornaments as worn by the gods, associated with prowess and honor, akin to the relic of medieval Christianity, and similarly used in binding oaths; yet, she notes that this woman was "not of high status" and remarks that the torc is worn back to front, the "terminals are at the back of the neck."[29] She then conjectures:

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[24]http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/bag/bronze_age_gold/guide_to_the_objects/middle_bronze_age.aspx Accessed October, 19 2015.

[25] John Collis, *The European Iron Age* (London: B.T. Batsford 1984), 12.

[26] Miranda Green, *An Archaeology of Images: Iconology and Cosmology in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (London: Routledge, 2004), 45-46.

[27] Andy Chapman, "Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement and a Middle Saxon Cemetery at Great Houghton, Northampton, 1996." *Northamptonshire Archaeology* 29 (2000): 9-11,

[28] Green, *An Archaeology of Images: Iconology and Cosmology in Iron Age and Roman Europe,* 46-47.

[29] Ibid., 46-47.

"It is almost as though the ornament was used to make a deliberate statement of insult, disgrace, and inversion of status, perhaps because the woman had transgressed some rule of her community or was otherwise regarded as excluded from it.[30]

In this burial, the duality inherent in such an image begins to emerge as a historical reality. This usage plays upon the inherent duality of any sign.[31]

But the duality of the torc (in itself) is more remarkably exemplified in the Viking slave trade. Free Viking men who bore the torc may have engaged in the enslavement of others.[32] Men marked by this sign of freedom would paradoxically have been emblematic of a form of human erasure. Further, concurrent with this practice was the use of the slave collar. A slave collar was an iron fetter whose signification is opposite to that of the torc; yet, their similarity of shape is striking, particularly considering that they could have existed side by side. Timothy Taylor, who recognizes the similarity of the two ornaments, speculates that:

it is hard not to see their voluntary adoption of a heavy precious metal neck ring as a classic item of personal adornment as embodying a statement about their position vis-à-vis those whose necks involuntarily wore iron or rope.[33]

The torc is in this context an ornament borne by champions of a society who were yet anti-social. Such free men in turn might bestow morphically similar objects upon those entering a state of thralldom. The relationship between freeman and slave is revealed in all its ambiguity by the equally complex ornament. The torc, as emblematic of heroism and freedom within early Anglo-Saxon culture, simultaneously evoked traces of the anti-hero and even the anti-human.

A final example will exhibit the open-ended duality of the torc-like. The West-African Manilla is an almost identical ornament, though believed to have be of distinct origin from the

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30 Ibid., 46-47.
31 If the statement is one of insult, the usage is akin to the crown of thorns placed upon the head of Christ.
32 See bibliography for sources on ancient and Viking slavery
33 Timothy Taylor, "Believing the Ancients: Quantitative and Qualitative Dimensions of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Later Prehistoric Eurasia" *World Archaeology* (33): 27–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/827887.

torc.[34] Most often worn as a bracelet, they were occasionally necklaces. A Manilla initially

signified wealth and status; yet, as the slave trade infiltrated Africa, they became the trade's

characteristic form of currency.[35] This torc-like symbol of social status became an image of

social betrayal, of broken bonds, and the anti-social. The next section of this paper explores how

Beowulf depicts a torc-like duality as inherent within the Anglo-Saxon polis.

C. Ambiguity of the Polis

    Beowulf suggests that the polis is an ambiguous entity. While a polis shields people from

darkness and violence, it also participates in these realities. Connotations of service and

community obscure a city's reliance upon that which is other. *Beowulf* depicts violence as an

external motive for social unity, but also as an energizing force from within, one which

ultimately threatens society. The poem's deconstructive representation of Viking society

discloses traces of a binary other within the polis. Such traces, normally obscured by heroic and

communal narratives, are revealed in *Beowulf* through the ambiguity which characterizes the

polis's sources, values, and stability. These are central thematic windings of opposition within

the torc-like poem.

Sources of the Polis

In the biblical narrative of Genesis, Cain is the historic founder of the polis. After committing

familial-social violence, he establishes a city (Gen. 4). In the context of the bible and

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[34] Robert Leonard, "Manillas - Money of West Africa" published by the Chicago Coin Club, 1998. Obtained directly from Author via email.
[35] Alun Rees, "*Manillas*" *Coin News* (April 2000): 46–47.

Christianity, the polis emerges, in part, in reaction to the violence which makes it necessary. Not without significance then is Grendel, an ancestor of Cain, the primordial being who harasses the Spear-Danes.[36] Grendel, as an embodiment of binary forces which structure the polis, displays how violence simultaneously threatens and constitutes the city. The poet suggests in Grendel that the anti-social is interwoven with the social, that civilization is never wholly separate from the wilderness and the moor. Just as Cain is simultaneously a social-founder and social-outcast, so too is Grendel. The polis is in its foundations mingled with the binary other which it opposes because its very function is to oppose such forces. Grendel is representative of that which is under social erasure, a reminder of what is primordial and bestial, and yet characteristic of social beginnings.[37]

Values of the Polis

Grendel also discloses a violence which continues to invigorate the Viking polis from within. Viking society is itself somewhat 'anti-social'. This helps account for the location of Grendel's marauding. That such carnage might occur out on the Moor would cause offense, but not the kind of horror which unchallenged bloodshed does when it takes place in the heart of the community.[38] This malevolent force haunts the inner sanctum of the polis, not only because of an ancient kinship, but by right of an ongoing association with the values which invigorate the city. He penetrates into the heart of the polis because its heart is a Victory (or Ring) Hall. The torc-

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[36] Marijane Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf". *PMLA* 93 (5). Modern Language Association: 973–81.

[37] Ibid., 976. This is not to say that the Spear-Danes are explicitly conscious of Grendel's import. Marijane Osborn states that the poet distinguishes between what an audience of the poem would identify and that which those within the poem know.

[38] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* XV

like duality of the city is illuminated by Grendel, who not only embodies that anti-social which unifies from without, but the anti-social whose source *is* the polis.

Consider how Anglo-Saxon society dependence upon raids and campaigns which enact violence similar to that of Grendel. This is emphasized in the poet's parallel depiction of Grendel and Shield Sheafson. Shield, like Grendel, is characterized as a "scourge of many tribes, a wrecker of mead benches."[39] Thus he is an enemy to the very form of society he establishes and maintains. Hero, raider, avenger, trader can be semi-fluid titles.[40] The hero of one people is yet the scourge of another. Such an ethos is perhaps most famously expressed in the *Odyssey*, where a good marriage is described as "a grief to… foes, and to… friends great joy."[41] That Shield, the heroic founder of the Danes, should closely intersect with a chief villain of the poem, suggests an implicit critique by comparison. Still, while the Viking ethos is critiqued, it is not rejected; what is rejected is a naïve or unambiguous reading of that ethos.[42]

Instability of the Polis

The poem expresses the fragility of the Viking polis in three ways: threat from an ambiguous *without* (Grendel, discussed above), threat from within (memory), and threat from a greater *Without* (fate or 'wyrd'). This section will discuss the second of these, memory. The final section of this paper will address fate through the binary themes of glory and futility.

The pattern of violence which strengthens society from within, ironically, threaten social stability. Violence itself cannot be wholly domesticated. It perpetuates itself in ways

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[39] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 3 (4-5)
[40] Paul Freedman, "Lecture 22 - Vikings / The European Prospect." In *HIST-210: THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES, 284–1000*, November 28, 2011.
[41] Homer, *Odyssey,* Book VI, Translation by S.H. Butcher & A. Lang (1909-1914): 90
[42] Cf. Kroll "'Beowulf': Hero as Keeper of Social Polity" 1986*, on* the doubleness of Grendel and Beowulf.

incompatible with a polis. This is depicted through the agency of memory in *Beowulf*. Memory is a means of social continuity and social participation, but is also paradoxically a threat to political unity. This ambiguity is explored in *Beowulf* through the vehicle of poetry which functions as a social embodiment of memory.

After Grendel and his Mother have been slain, a bard within the poem weaves Beowulf's exploits together into the textual-history of the past. While the poet recalls 'historic' events, the poem reciprocally shapes a social understanding of them. Poetry both preserves and constructs the *ornament* of social memory. Without this shared memory, a polis can hardly exist. Kinship, loyalty, and sacrifice derive force through the poetic.

But poetry is not a straightforward social ornament. Just as the torc, it displays traces of erasure and binary opposition. Memory evoked through poetry is unpredictable when one's history is interwoven with violence. Within the Viking world, this kind of memory is always *loom*ing.[43] Poetry can and must be selective, even repressive. Yet, despite the intentions of the poet or the polis, it is impossible to prevent traces of the past from being recalled by a given auditor. This is the meaning of the Finnesburg episode (1050-1192), retold at the height of Beowulf's early conquests.[44] The poem within a poem recounts the history of a people who are incapable of suppressing the past. For them, the ties that bind prove to be ties of violence. Poetic-history mythically unites a people, even as it is itself a source of instability. This is because history impinges upon the present. Poetic-memory which organizes the polis will always reflect the duality of a society, if only in trace. Like a torc, a poem is an ornament of ambiguity whose windings and termini embody the duality of human history.

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[43] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* line 697
[44] Cf. Kroll, "'Beowulf': Hero as Keeper of Social Polity" 1986, p.119

The ambiguity of social memory is explicitly addressed in the poet and Beowulf's own reflections. Beowulf, for instance, foresees instability for the Danes and appears to associate such instability both with memory and ornament. He gives utterance to this when he meditates on Hrothgar's hopes. The Danish king wishes to heal a breach by offering his daughter in marriage. But such a gesture is problematic. Even while Hrothgar's daughter functions as a sign of peace, she is simultaneously a reminder of the past. Thus the meaning of her traditional name (peace-weaver) is critiqued or revealed in its ambiguity, as she weaves together not just two tribes, but past and present. The very intermingling of a people who have wronged one another creates conditions under which such wrongs can be remembered. For the poet of *Beowulf*, the polis is bound to this ringed history of violence. It is for this reason that every glorious victory is attenuated by reflections of instability. The very structure of social history and ornamentation reflects and contributes to this cycle.[45] The hero of the poem imagines such a perpetuation of violence.

> An old spearman will speak while they are drinking, having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive memories of the massacre; his mood will darken…he will begin to test a young man's temper…and so he keeps on recalling and accusing (2041-2057).

Sight of an ornament of war stirs memory and provokes the cycle of vengeance. Beowulf recognizes how memory temporizes peace and leads to social instability. The Viking world is one in which the destructive forces implicit in human society are inevitably at work. Yet, in as much as any society is structured and ornamented by violence, a polis will always be threatened by memory, betrayal, and binary opposition. The bonds of memory, the encircling story or

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[45] The world of *Beowulf* has yet to be transformed by the cross, in which a wergild is paid, not by the guilty, but by one who is free from the historic tapestry of guilt, who yet enters into human history. The cross stands as a new and redemptive ornament which transforms social foundations, guilt, and memory.

ornament which constitutes a people, is simultaneously a 'hoop' of fate. These ornaments and their histories ever wind back to their termini.

D. Ambiguity of Glory

Grendel and political violence is to some extent preliminary to the full critique of the poem. In Grendel, the polis and humanity encounter a foe who can be defeated, if not always and forever, then occasionally. If quasi-human violence was Beowulf's only adversary, it is possible to imagine the torc being brought to closure. But in the darkness, there is a doom "more wyrd than wyrm"[46] whose coming is "unknown but certain."[47] Death is indomitable and threatens more than just social stability; it threatens the values which make life meaningful. This force deepens the binary opposition which the poem explores. Yet, it is in the face of this greater Other that glory is brutally and most brilliantly forged.[48]By winding glory and futility together, *Beowulf* raises glory to its full grandeur, even as it is critiqued.

Death sets the "forsquare" Viking ethos in relief and lends the poem its 'elegaic' quality.[49] This doom has no equal counter-force within the polis. The otherness of death is such that it contextualizes all action, righteous or unrighteous, worthy or shameful, in the framework of futility. Human life and the windings of the torc are forged in the relief of this much greater outer-darkness. Darkness is both the end and the beginning of the windings of fate (wyrd).[50]

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[46] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* XIX
[47] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* XVII
[48] "Let us by all means esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall. But *Beowulf,* I fancy, plays a larger part than is recognized in helping us to esteem them." Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," 114; 128-130
[49] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* XXVIII
[50] Fate as weaving fits this sense and Leyerle's idea of text. The end of this paper deals with "cutting of the thread."

Therefore, the poem's overall shape replicates the *termini* of the torc, in that it contextualizes human life and all its ambiguity in the finality of death. *Beowulf* opens and closes in funerals, and doom is presented throughout the poem. Mortality encircles and penetrates the social circle; even as darkness remains inconceivably other, formless, and *weird*. Yet, the deconstructive force which threatens human dignity at its very roots, also lends glory its stark and impressive deportment, it lends beauty to what Tolkien refers to as "the long defeat."

Glory takes on majesty because it willingly confronts that which is not only other, but greater. A Viking who freely dons the torc binds himself to facing this futility; he is committed to standing fast before mortal doom. [51] While Beowulf's final act of heroism ultimately robs him and his kingdom of the stability which it attempts to effect, the futility of his gesture *weirdly* enhances its beauty. His unflinching sacrifice is set in contrast to his fellows who abandon him at this crisis. In failing their king, they fail to submit to the windings and termini of wyrd, termini which they had pledged to face. They initiate events which ultimately shatter the social ornament and bring their polis to its conclusion. In parting from their social role, in breaking with their pledge, they fail to hold the line and uphold the social-shape of the torc. They are as men who having looked into a mirror, walk away and forget what sort they are.[52] They fail, not only to perform their duty, but to face their own mortality.

The poem reveals how glory, social stability, and human dignity require a willingness to plunge into absurdity, to face, not only the windings of fate, but that final otherness. The grandeur of a Beowulf, a hero who goes down fighting, who walks headlong into defeat, is a grandeur which remains faithful to our earthly destiny.[53] It is rather closer to our universal story

[51] Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* XIV, lines 2631-2660
[52] James 1:23-24, *The Holy Bible*: King James Version. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
[53] Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," 118-119; 128-130

and even to the crucifixion. It may be for this reason that J.R.R. Tolkien, a Christian and a

admirer of *Beowulf*, depicts Bilbo and Sam in apparent defeat "at the end of all things."[54]

Tolkien, who first popularized the elegiac nature of *Beowulf,* seems to have concluded *Lord of*

the Rings in a manner similar to the poem.

> '…the journey's finished. But after coming all that way I don't want to give up yet. It's not like me, somehow, if you understand.'

> 'Maybe not, Sam,' said Frodo; 'but it's like things are in the world. Hopes fail. An end comes…We are lost in ruin and downfall, and there is no escape.'

> …Even as they passed towards the Mountain's quaking feet, a great smoke and steam belched from the Sammath Naur, and the side of the cone was riven open, and a huge fiery vomit rolled in slow thunderous cascade down the eastern mountain-side…Their last strength of mind and body was swiftly ebbing…there was no more escape. It was an island now…All about it the earth gaped, and from deep rifts and pits smoke and fumes leaped up. Behind them the Mountain was convulsed. Great rents opened in its side. Slow rivers of fire came down the long slopes towards them. Soon they would be engulfed.[55]

Sam and Frodo's predicament echoes that of the Viking hero.[56] Surrounded by mountains, they

are encircled by fire, surrounded by death, hooped within a story wrought by a "Ring of

Doom."[57] Such grandeur recedes if one artificially closes the circle; if one does not recognize

that closure is effected primarily through a participation in doomed deeds.
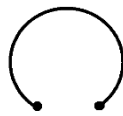
Conclusion

The torc-like form of *Beowulf* intentionally eludes what might be called closure in the

triumphal sense. However, the poem is full of conclusions and even triumph. It depicts the end of

a period of terror under Grendel, the end of the reign of Beowulf, and the coming end of the Geat

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[54] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Mariner Books 2012): 244
[55] Tolkien, *The Return of the King,* 242-243
[56] Susannah Mandel (2008) rightly compares the dragon escapades in *the Hobbit* to those in *Beowulf.*
[57] Tolkien, *The Return of the King,* 243

polis. It also depicts the end of an era which embodied the clarity of glory.[58] Yet the poem does

not suggest that glory or these binary forces simply cease to be at work in the world. Instead,

such windings and weavings may take on new shapes and discover new ornaments of expression.

Appendix of Images

A. Snettisham Torque

B. The Dying Gaul

C-1. Controversial Slave Chain

C-2. Controversial Slave Collar

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[58] Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," 114, 119, 120.

D. Gang Slave Chain

E. West-African Manilla

F. Torc from Museum St. Remi

G. Ipswich Horde Torc

A. 4th BC, Great Torc, Snettisham Horde, British Museum
B. Grandmont, Jean-Pol. *The Dying Galatian*. Digital image. *Wikipedia*
C. 1025 AD, Slave Chain & Collar © National Museum of Ireland
(Nature of objects contested)
D. Gang Slave Chain, Museum of Whales at Cardiff. Image from Taylor, 2001
Photography by Adrian Gollop
E. Manilla, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford
F. Bronze 4th Century BC, Torc, St. Remi Museum, France. wikicommons Image by Vassil
G. Ipswich Horde Torc

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