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Brunson, Rebecca

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victim after his return from Venice through a marshland, and finally as a visitant who talks with his son Jacopo in a dream to tell him where to find the final thirteen cantos of the Divine Comedy, which no one has been able to find during the search in the eight months since his death. Boccaccio is cited as authority for the last story, based on his oral interviews with Dante’s sons and others before he wrote Dante’s biography. The reader is also reminded in the last sentence of the book that Boccaccio also added divina to the title of Dante’s Commedia.

This book, in sum, is a magisterial delight.

Delmar C. Homan, Bethany College, Emeritus


Even a brief glance at the cover of this book should alert interested readers that this is no ordinary scholarly treatment of Beowulf; under a banner-like headline—“Take Charge of your Career!”—and an endorsement by a prominent businessman stands a warrior in . . . a Viking helmet? Wearing a suit and tie? Carrying not a silver sword and shield, but a silver hard-sided briefcase? As anachronistic and odd as the above description may sound (and look), this image is actually quite appropriate as it fast becomes clear that the “business” of Beowulf for Business is not the poem itself, but, rather, the advice it can offer for the modern-day warrior in the corporate world. As E. L. Risden notes in his introduction, Beowulf is “The Practical Poem for People in Business (And Other Professions)”; thus he moves back and forth between the battle-play and the boardroom in order to illustrate the “powerful, immediate, practical applications” (2) that the poem offers today’s businessperson as he or she struggles to make a way (and perhaps a successful name) in an arena as rife with peril, greed, and backstabbing as that of the Anglo-Saxons.

The book begins with a brief introduction that, in addition to outlining the author’s purpose and structural plan for the volume, sketches out a most casual description of the poem’s background and
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plot. Written in a conversational tone—peppered with contractions, repeated references to ‘you,’ the reader, and sentence constructions more laid-back than formal—the book, it quickly becomes clear, is intended for an audience perhaps more business-savvy than scholarly and comprised of readers who may have no more than a passing knowledge of the poem in modern English translation. “But no worries,” we are told. “You can find many good translations” at local bookstores and libraries or on the shelves of any “decent English teacher” (5), although none are identified here. And for those readers who do not want to bother with reading or revisiting the poem prior to or alongside their study of this modern guide, Risden promises to provide enough detail and context for the application of the lessons that follow. While this approach, practically speaking, may draw in readers who want to “get by” with little personal knowledge of the poem, it severely diminishes the potential power and pleasure of the main part of this book.

The book is divided into 25 chapters, the first 18 of which follow the chronology of the poem, each focusing on poetic passages of varying lengths (app. 85-400 lines). The remaining seven chapters jump around the text, offering discussions of such items as the digressions, maxims, and major speeches that can be found sprinkled throughout Beowulf. Nearly every chapter is divided into five main parts: (1) “The Idea,” or the specific business principle highlighted in a given chapter; (2) “The Passage,” a summary of the part of the poem that inspired the idea; (3) “The Application,” a discussion of how the lessons from that passage might be implemented in various business settings; (4) “The Manager’s Spotlight,” a look at how these lessons affect those in leadership roles; and (5) “Points to Ponder,” a series of questions designed for further reflection or group discussion.

In theory, this organizational scheme is effective in that it divides the poem into manageable pieces and highlights one business principle at a time. The majority of the chapters range in length from 6-12 pages, which means that readers uninterested in plowing through the whole book may simply choose relevant sections that interest them; indeed, I would discourage reading this book through from cover to cover. Take, for example, chapter five, imaginatively titled, “The Trophy on the Wall, or, It Ain’t Over Till It’s Over”: “The Idea” warns
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against “grotesque” displays of success in favor of tastefulness and restraint; this corresponds to the hoisting up of Grendel’s arm, a dangerous display that invites catastrophic consequences. Readers interested in the necessity of faith between coworkers might choose instead to turn to chapter eight, “Faith and Responsibility,” and its discussion of the faith and loyalty that Beowulf’s men show their leader as they wait for him to return triumphant from his fight with Grendel’s mother long after Hrothgar’s men have given up the watch. Examples of other chapters include “Foreign Waters, or, Really Foreign Turf” (functioning successfully in unfamiliar places); “Imprudent Boss, Prudent Employee” (operating amidst management’s often bad decisions”); and “On Monsters and Terrorism” (combating the effects of potential terrorist acts against business).

In practice, however, this organizational scheme can be incredibly frustrating for readers who expect either a detailed discussion of the poem or a practical set of applications that incorporate more specifically described business scenarios. Often the applications of the business principle introduced by each chapter’s opening idea/passage combo are described in only general terms. Nothing is really rooted in specificity outside the poem’s landscape; that is, while the author’s knowledge of the poem remains unquestioned, his description of how the poem’s principles would translate to the corporate arena seems more theoretical than practical. Further, the two sections of each chapter that are the least firmly tied to the poem—“The Manager’s Spotlight” and “Points to Ponder”—often seem only tangentially related to the highlighted idea, thus they actually could be interchangeable between chapters. A little tighter focus within individual parts (or chapters) here and there would improve the overall effect of the whole.

In his opening pages, Risden cites an unnamed scholar’s observation that Beowulf is the most written-about work in all of English literature (and I’ll have to trust him on that!). This assertion, however, prompts the following two questions: Do we need another book about Beowulf? And do we need Beowulf for Business? Perhaps. My concern is that its intended audience—business people looking for strategies that can help them advance their careers—will most likely not read it. Although those of us who know the poem well may beg to
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differ, *Beowulf* is intimidating to many potential readers who, despite Risden's assurances otherwise, remain unsure of their ability to tackle an old and complicated text. In addition, many interested parties—teachers, students, and scholars of the poem—may be left wanting. Its complete lack of scholarly apparatus may be a bit off-putting or unfamiliar to an audience looking for a new classroom approach or a "way into" the poem.

And yet, despite the misgivings listed above, much of *Beowulf for Business* is a delight to read. The frustrations I felt while reading it stem as much from my pre-formed expectations of a book from a well-known scholar about a poem I know well and teach often as they do from my ultimate lack of knowledge of or experience with the corporate self-help genre. I wanted this book to become something it simply is not nor promises to be, but that is my problem, not Risden's. Once I embraced this new genre, I found instead an unanticipated approach to a familiar text. I finished *Beowulf for Business* with the feeling that I was not a recipient of a scholarly lecture, but a participant in a lively conversation with a knowledgeable and engaged individual eager to share his passion for both *Beowulf* and its modern practical applications.

*Rebecca Brunson, University of Kansas*