

**Forged Pasts:
Paul Kingsnorth's Monitory Neo-Medievalism in *The Wake***

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One should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in which the question of the tongue is raised into which a discourse on translation is translated.

– Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel”

In 2014, Paul Kingsnorth published *The Wake*,¹ a crowd-funded novel written in what Kingsnorth terms “a shadow tongue,” combining elements of Old English and Modern English:

This novel is not written in Old English – that would be unreadable to anyone except scholars. It is written instead in what might be termed a shadow tongue – a pseudo-language intended to convey the feeling of the old language by combining some of its vocabulary and syntax with the English we speak today.²

Kingsnorth goes on to discuss the rules he set for himself in the creation of this “shadow-tongue”—to use only words which originated in Old English and to not use letters which did not exist in Old English—and to explain his reasons for setting himself (and the reader) such a task:

The way we speak is specific to our time and place. Our assumptions, our politics, our worldview, our attitudes, all are implicit in our words, and what we do with them. To put 21st-century sentences into the mouths of eleventh-century characters would be the equivalent of giving them iPads and cappuccinos: just wrong.³

Now this is curious, because this language is profoundly 21st-century in its neo-medievalism. It simultaneously insists on its status as a pseudo-language, and its ability to somehow invoke an 11th-century world. It calls attention to itself as simulacrum, and yet demands that we read it as a palimpsest whose original can still be discerned underneath the writing on the page.

And this demand has been answered by reader after reader, in review after review: “I was there, back in 1066”⁴; “I felt like I was reading the actual diary of someone from the eleventh century”⁵; “. . .

¹ Paul Kingsnorth, *The Wake* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015).

² Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 353.

³ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 353.

⁴ Geoff Dyer, “If You Can Create a New Lexicon, Why Resort then to Genre Cliches?” rev. of *The Wake*, by Paul Kingsnorth, *The Guardian*, 3 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/03/trouble-whole-new-lexicon-genre-cliches.

⁵ Lucien Desar, “I Felt Like I Was Reading the Actual Diary of Someone From the Eleventh Century,” rev. of *The Wake*, by Paul Kingsnorth, *Amazon*, 4 September 2014, www.amazon.com/Wake-Novel-Paul-Kingsnorth/product-reviews/1555977170/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_6?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&filterByStar=positive&pageNumber=6.

fastest time travel ever. The rhythm and power of the language rip forth from the feelings of the conquered English [sic]”⁶; “This is an eyewitness account of a great moment in history.”⁷ For these readers, this *is* Old English, and the initial strangeness and early difficulty in translation give it the kind of “authenticity” not found in other historical fiction. By engaging in *translatio*, these readers have carried this language back into the 11th century, and by extension, are far more likely to read *The Wake* as a text from the past: immediate and unmediated.

The novel’s title invites us to expect a riff on the 12th-century *Gesta Herwardi*, one of the most well-known medieval outlaw tales, and the subject of another re-imagining by Charles Kingsley in 1866. Hereward is an irresistible subject for a medievalist text: the tale of an outlaw exiled from his family for youthful excess, who proves himself in the courts of the Viking islands, Cornwall, Ireland, and Flanders, returning to post-Conquest England only to find his family dead and his house occupied by Frenchmen. Taking immediate revenge, he kills the occupiers, gathers a fighting force, and turns the Isle of Ely into a fortified refuge from which to fight the Normans. In the process, he displays strategic intelligence, a facility with trickery and disguise that more than compensates for his smaller forces and lack of resources, and a strict commitment to the ideals of compassion and chivalry. He is not without error; to avenge his betrayal at the hands of the Abbot of Peterborough, he and his men plunder the church. However, after he receives a vision of a displeased St. Peter, he immediately returns the church’s possessions, and is rewarded the very next night by a literal spiritual guide; lost in the forest, a wolf (a figure associated with the local cult of St Edmund) guides them to the outskirts of Stamford. Hereward’s intelligence, bravery, and virtue gain him the love of all who meet him and the support of the dispossessed English.

Given Kingsnorth’s own unapologetic nationalism and his decades-long mission to save what he terms “Real England”—“the small, the ancient, the indefinable, the unprofitable, the meaningful, the interesting, and the quirky⁸—one might expect *The Wake* to be a Kingsley-esque celebration of English resistance to the Conquest. But it’s not. Although the language of the text invites readers to see this as an unproblematic “tunnel to the past,”⁹ the whole of *The Wake* is both a meditation on the impossibility of retrieving a true history and a parable about the dangers of invoking the past.

⁶ Akdoc, “The Best Way to Read This Book is on a Winter’s Night,” rev. of *The Wake*, by Paul Kingsnorth, *Amazon*, 25 November 2015,

www.amazon.com/Wake-Novel-Paul-Kingsnorth/product-reviews/1555977170/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_3?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=3

⁷ Edward R. Maxwell, “A Great Novel, but Not for the Faint of Heart,” rev. of *The Wake*, by Paul Kingsnorth, *Amazon*, 19 September 2015,

https://www.amazon.com/Wake-Novel-Paul-Kingsnorth/product-reviews/1555977170/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_7?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=7.

⁸ Paul Kingsnorth, *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland* (London; Portobello Books, 2008), 7.

⁹ Anonymous, “I Was There!,” rev. of *The Wake*, by Paul Kingsnorth, *Amazon*, 14 October 2015, www.amazon.com/Wake-Novel-Paul-Kingsnorth/product-reviews/1555977170/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_5?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=5.

The novel is narrated by one Buccmaster of Holland (Lincolnshire), a local landowner possessing around sixty acres of land and a position of some independence:

three oxgangs of land i had and two geburs to worc for me on it and four oxen of my own for the plough this was more than any other man in the ham. Baerlic i had and rye scep and hors also I had swine pasture holt my own water aeppels on many good treows. . . . a great man i was in my ham all cnawan me a seat i had on the wapentac and free i was from the worc of other men. . . . geld wolde I gif but only to the cyng not to the thegn. sum lytel worc would i do for the thegn for this is how things was but no man was ofer me no man will be ofer me.¹⁰

Immediately we see Buccmaster's own particular form of doublethink: he insists simultaneously on the importance of a class structure that allows for his privileged position, but will not admit his own subjection even as he describes it; despite owing money and service to both the king and the local thegn, he stubbornly repeats that "no man is ofer me" and tries to minimize the service he owes.

Buccmaster's primary influence was his grandfather, a follower of the Germanic gods who instilled in Buccmaster a fantasy of a past completely free from authority:

he wold spec micel of the eald daegs of the anglisc of our folcs comen here to the grene lands from across the wid sea. and those daegs he wolde always sae those daegs was best for our folc for we were as one agan the ingenga and we was free. no thegn there was then no preosts no crist no cyng of angland but free men alone in the wilde tacan the land men in freodam not in thrall. marc this he saes this is how angland moste always be gif no geld listen to no law if thu can run from it for always they will cum to tac from thu what is thine always the geref a the thegn the wapentac the eorl, the cyng. . .¹¹

Like the fantasies of the "simpler" or "more organic" Middle Ages, this impossibly romantic dream of an early Anglo-Saxon England free from economic structures, laws, distinctions among persons, or communal obligations tries to make these aspects of society an imposition that one can locate in the figure of the outsider at a specific point, thus able to be changed by the purging of the outsider. The past becomes a resource to re-imagine the present.

Although Buccmaster dreams of an England united against the "ingenga," he is no patriot. When Harold summons the fyrd to fight Tostig and Harold Hardrada, the local geref a tries to appeal to Buccmaster's national pride: "herald cyng he calls all anglisce men fit and of feohtan age to cum to

¹⁰ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 11. Note: Kingsnorth's language does not conform to any rules regarding punctuation and capitalization of words. The text here and in the following excerpts is exactly as it appears in the novel.

¹¹ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 16-17.

him for angland is threatened from ofer sea and its men foeht for angland.”¹² Buccmaster responds only with “this is no good it is weodmonth. . . . We have timber to heaw a barn to mac good i is a socman of these parts i has three oxgangs who will worc my ground the fuccan swine.”¹³ Without his sons and his laborers to work the land, Buccmaster begins losing the economic foundation of his identity, and turns to the fantasies instilled in him by his grandfather. Even as his mind calls them up, however, the danger in so doing is made clear to both Buccmaster and the reader:

it was that night i had the first sight of him . . . that night when all was tacan from me . . . for micel time it had been cuman sum thing had been locan for me sum thing had been growan and callan from the deorcness.¹⁴

Buccmaster has summoned a figure from his grandfather’s stories: Weland the Smith, the master maker of rings, armor, and weaponry. Captured and crippled by an evil king who imposes forced labor on him, Weland lures the king’s children to his smithy, kills the sons, rapes the daughter, and in a perverse form of service, makes cups and armor out of the son’s bodies and sends them back to the king before escaping. Buccmaster ties Weland to both the English and the land itself as an ahistorical constant, a resource to be called upon in times of trouble:

weland he is in our blud and our land. eald he is ealdor efen than the lost gods under the mere eald he is lic the fenn and the seas. for he cum ofer the seas in a time before time and with him he brought what macd this land ours.¹⁵

The sinister tone that describes Weland’s arrival is answered by his appearance when he presents himself to Buccmaster. More Grendel than godsend, this figure represents a past that cannot and should not exist in the present, a living death:

...this man he was foul to see, from his mouth there cum fronds like the sceots of bloms they wafs as he specs there is no haer upon his heafod but the hide is thicce and craccd cuman away in places and his eages is blaec lic night on the water
in his left hand there is a haor the hamor of a smith the hamor of the great smith what lifs in the eald beorgs nad hin his right hand there is a heafodpanne the heafodpanne of a wifman and it is all ofer gold and stans and cut in two lic it is a cyngs cuppe for wine or mead and the smith through his rottin mouth he specs to me again and he saes thu cnawen me.¹⁶

Buccmaster refuses at first to name him or speak directly to him, a last attempt of his damaged mind to overcome this revenant medievalism. But with the news of Harold’s death and the loss at

¹² Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 43.

¹³ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 44.

¹⁴ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 69.

¹⁵ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 93.

¹⁶ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 69.

Hastings, he embraces the figure of Weland, who forges for him a new orthopedic identity to compensate for the loss of his sons, his land, and his status. Weland tells him the old gods have been incarnated in him, and that he has been chosen to lead the fight to retake England from the Normans.

Like Buccmaster/Weland's intertwined identity, the narrative here splits itself into two potential medievalist tropes. First, the reader familiar with either medieval outlaw tales or their medievalist retellings—*Braveheart*, *Robin Hood*, *Prince of Thieves*, and the like—is primed to read Buccmaster as the eventual redeemer of the conquered English. Alternatively, as the title teases us to imagine, the figure of Hereward instead will come to the forefront as the protagonist and hero, with Buccmaster relegated to the role of narrator/follower. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes apparent that Kingsnorth is instead engaged in a long process of frustrating readerly expectations as a way to show the dangers inherent in unreflective medievalism. As Stanley Fish noted of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the experience of *The Wake* is “not so much a reading as an entangling”; we become Buccmaster.

Buccmaster's moment of relative greatness comes post-Conquest, when the gerefá (the reeve) comes to gather money on William's behalf, and Buccmaster refuses. In retaliation, the Normans burn down Buccmaster's great house and barn, kill all of his livestock, and slaughter his wife. In the narrative trajectory of outlaw texts, this should be the catalyst that changes Buccmaster from a selfish Babbitt to a national hero, and, for a while, the text plays with that possibility. Buccmaster returns from eel-hunting to find his home a smoking ruin: “all beorned it was . . . all heges down all barns beorned my swine cwelled bladan in the hold my oxen slit open my sceop all blaec and cwelled my aappel treows cut all to the ground and then the hus.”¹⁷ From the ruin, Buccmaster retrieves his grandfather's great sword, supposedly made by Weland the Smith, digs a grave for his wife, and swears revenge for her death: “I laid down also my wyrd and saed I will tac them for thus i will haf my wergild in frenc blud and ofer her then I swept the eorth and all was done on my lands.”¹⁸ Buccmaster, now an exile in the greenwood, is joined soon by a child of Danish descent, Tose, and Grimcell, a cottar from the town. This small warband represents the unification of earlier peoples (Danish and English) and classes (cottar, landowner, swineherd) in the struggle against the Normans.

This almost painfully clichéd set of tropes, however, is no sooner evoked than it is destroyed. Buccmaster's first swinging of his great sword is not at a Norman enemy, but at one of the swine, and he bungles the slaughter with an over-dull axe. He manages his first Norman kill, the new thegn of Langtoft, and expects this to galvanize its inhabitants to join him in open warfare. Instead, their killing of the thegn has brought down a terrible reprisal on the town; they witness the horrific execution of an old man, with the promise of one each day until the thegn's killer comes forward.

¹⁷ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 103.

¹⁸ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 111.

Instead of liberating the town, Buccmaster's actions bring about greater suffering for its inhabitants. Grimcell, the voice of reason, articulates the futility of these sporadic attacks on individual Normans: "for e fry ingenga we cwell, saes grimcell, they cwells a ham. we digs our graefs."¹⁹

As Buccmaster revels in the killing of the thegn, and then lapses into a period of inactivity, Tose becomes more interested in the stories of Hereward the newly-arrived gleoman tells:

Hereward they saes is a great man of anglanð . . . he is spac of in these lands now with fear now with fyr . . . he is bace to lead men agan the frenc . . . and it is saed they is here now gathran folcs for the feoht for the great feoht that is cuman for the time hwen anglanð rises agan the frenc and drifs them baec to the sea.

well at this of course the dumb cilde tose is leapan around lic a frog in a fuccan croc. he teorns to me with light in his eages and he saes buccmaster this is the man i was tellin thu of. . . buccmaster we moste find this man and feoht with him for together there will be no stoppan us all.²⁰

Despite the wisdom of Tose's proposal, the ludicrously small werod Buccmaster currently has (three members) and his inability to attract more followers after the thegn's death, Buccmaster's own fixed belief that he is the incarnation of the old gods causes him to harshly refuse Tose's advice, and to insist that he has the ability to gather a following as large as Hereward's.

In their quest to find more followers, Buccmaster, Grimcell, and Tose visit a small village that represents, in little, the way of life that Buccmaster lost:

...her ein this small place in the holt it was lic anglanð for sum small time was layf again . . . in the straet btrweon the hus there was sum folcs cum from the felds and they were cuman with blitheness. The sunne was high in the heofon this mergen the heofon lic flax and from the felds was cuman men with sithes and wifmen with sicls and they had barelic sheafs...²¹

Buccmaster has come upon them in the middle of a harvest festival, and urges them to join his werod and fight the Normans to save themselves as a people, but he can't see that their experience of the Normans has been different from his own:

...all things we had was gan our children wil haf frenc names they will spec frenc words all that we is is bean tacan from us.

the gerefa then he wafs his hand at the bard and the waegn. this is all that we is he saes and it is the same as it was and will cepe bean this way no frenc has cum here to mad us do frenc

¹⁹ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 155.

²⁰ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 181.

²¹ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 193.

things. before the frenc cum this was a wilde place there was out laws in these wuds now there is more laws from abuf and ther is no out laws. thy herald kync he did not cepe us safe yet this French cyng does now. what does thu grene men say to this.²²

When Buccmaster retorts that this makes them “fuccan thralls,” the gerefa’s answer lays bare an England far removed from fantasies about a free past:

we is all thralls my freond all the time and always has been in angland. tell me my freond how is these folcs free when their thegn ascs of them three days on his land efry wic...when he ascs for a score of hens efry sixmonth or fifty cards of their own wud when he wold lic the fyr higher in his hall. or when the cyng comes thru and calls up the fyrd and they is tacan from their wifman and their cynn with nothing but stans and sithes to sum feld to die in a dic for his war.²³

In the gerefa’s speech, and his closing insistence that this community will keep to themselves and follow the laws of England, we see a radically different sense of England from that posited by Buccmaster. This is the England of local community and tradition, and the laws of England are the laws of whoever happens to be sovereign at the time. The gerefa cuts through Buccmaster’s lofty rhetoric about freedom by reminding us that the old boss was the same as the new boss, at least to those of the lower classes. Buccmaster cannot accept this alternate view of England, and reacts by reframing the members of the town as: “anglich folcs who wolde be frenc /they is not anglich.”²⁴ This in turn, enables him to go back, demand payment from them in lieu of sending fighting men, and then kill the gerefa for refusing to pay. Kingsnorth underscores this as a conflict between two conflicting images of a past England by having “Weland” kill the gerefa:

weland it seemed weland took my sweord from me then and done with it what sceolde be done ... weland he ran for the gerefa and a roar there was in the barn succ as there had nefer been and the gerefa fell with the sweord in his heorte.²⁵

In punishing them with violence for refusing extortion, Buccmaster is far more ‘frenc’ than those he condemns, a point reinforced by Grimcell: “it is bad. . . for so many cwelled in angland and now there is one mor.”²⁶

Disaster follows disaster. Buccmaster gains a few more men from another town, and buoyed with his now formidable force of twelve, he decides (in the face of continuing clamor to join Hereward), that they must attack a larger town and do a pre-emptive strike on a castle under construction.

²² Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 197.

²³ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 198.

²⁴ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 201.

²⁵ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 205.

²⁶ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 206.

Again, Kingsnorth frustrates a readership that expects cunning and courage to overcome almost impossible odds. Instead of victory by stratagem, the small band is betrayed by the gleoman and runs away immediately back to the woods, losing most of their new members in the process. With this loss, Buccmaster descends further into madness. Going back to the fens for a vision, he “hears” the voices of the old gods telling him it is “the Christ” that must be killed. When his small band manages to capture the bishop of Ely, Buccmaster decides on a symbolic killing of “the Christ” by sacrificing the bishop to the old gods. Buccmaster puts on the old armor of his ancestors, a mask and cape, and announces his decision to make a “blood-eagle” of the bishop (a horrific sacrificial torture where the victim’s lungs are pulled out through his back, resembling an eagle’s wings). This is too much for Grimcell:

o thu is fuccan mad thu is craccd and broc...what is this scit thu and thy sweord and thy eald masc and they eald fuccan gods there is naht left for thu naht thu most see this.²⁷

Buccmaster’s tragedy is one of misreading: he presents himself to the captive bishop as a living metaphor for an unproblematically heroic, non-Christian past: “i is raedwald, i is raedwulf, i is Beowulf, i is harald cyng last of the anglisch I shall be.”²⁸ In this careful litany, Kingsnorth shows us the process of revisionist history and textual excision that damns Buccmaster to failure. Raedwald sanctioned both the Christian and Germanic religions. Raedwulf died fighting for Christianity. Beowulf was a great warrior, but the epic is careful to show his failures as a king and war leader. Harald is criticized in the novel earlier for strategic mistakes at Hastings.

One by one, each of his small werod refuses to stand with Buccmaster: “we is not thy men no mor saes godric we is goan with grimcell we is goan to Hereward enough of this Buccmaster now enough.”²⁹ The only thing Buccmaster’s planned moment of glory has done is buy time for the Normans to track the path of the bishop. As Buccmaster attacks his own men, they are surrounded and mowed down by a group of Norman knights; Buccmaster deserts his fellow English and flees back to the woods, invoking a curse on those who refused to follow his fantasy: “beorn, my weac werod, beorn angland beorn.”³⁰ Buccmaster fails to realize that the past cannot be simply brought back into the present; the attempt to carry himself and his men back into the past ends in disaster. In so doing, Kingsnorth provides the reader with an object lesson in the potential dangers of medievalism, all within a text that lures the reader with the seductive possibility of chronological *translatio*.

²⁷ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 338.

²⁸ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 334.

²⁹ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 338.

³⁰ Kingsnorth, *Wake*, 344.