

The Hyborian Review

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The hot-dog days of summer...

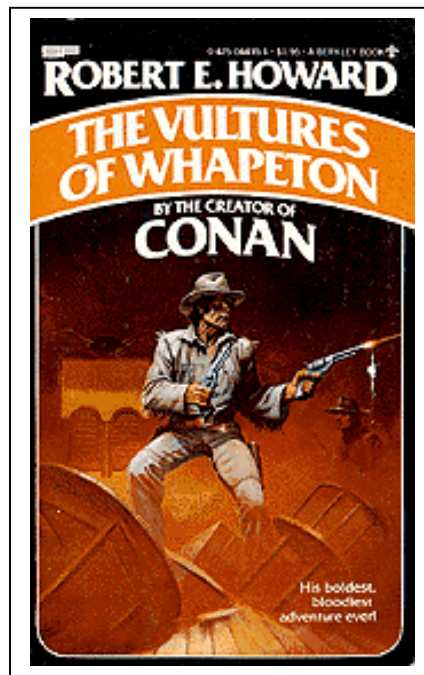
Great REH Quotes

From *The Vultures of Whapeton*, copyright 1936 by Chesterfield Publications, Inc. (or...Wapeton?)

A woman's revenge is best not served...

When Glory Brand ran from the backroom of the Golden Garter, her soul was in an emotional turmoil that almost amounted to insanity. The shock of her brutal disillusionment vied with passionate shame of her own gullibility and an unreasoning anger. Out of this seething cauldron grew a blind desire to hurt the man who had unwittingly hurt her. Smarting vanity had its part, too, for with characteristic and illogical feminine conceit, she believed that he had practiced an elaborate deception in order to fool her into falling in love with him -- or rather with the man she thought he was. If he was false with men, he must be false with women, too. That thought sent her into hysterical fury, blind to all except a desire for revenge. She was a primitive, elemental young animal, like most of her profession of that age and place; her emotions were powerful and easily stirred, her passions stormy. Love could turn quickly to hate.

Reprint info - See page 4.



Robert E. Howard's *Worms of the Earth*

His Classic Bran Mak Morn Story

A Review, by Garret Romaine

Worms of the Earth, copyright 1932 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, November 1932.

Revenge is a dish best served cold, or so goes the saying. For, served piping hot, there's no telling just what an impassioned warrior might do.

When revenge is the motive of a King protecting his people, the outcome gets dicier still. Here is the dilemma served up by Robert E. Howard in *Worms of the Earth*: to what lengths may a man justifiably go in order to right a wrong? What deal with the devil is excusable when the enemy is so utterly and despicably ruthless in imposing its authority? Can wrong, heaped on wrong, ever make right the first injustice?

Bartlett's Quotations is packed with references to the revenge motif. Wrote Shakespeare, in *Merchant of Venice* (Act III):

If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

Even Milton weighed in on revenge -- here, a quote lifted from *Paradise Lost*:

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; th' unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield.

Both great writers find a place for this most ancient of human motivations. Were we to ever lose the lust for revenge, what meek and timid souls must we be? Or is this dawn of a new millennium perhaps a time to consider a new day, a new righteousness? Easy enough to say, from a suburban stronghold with comfortable surroundings and peaceful intentions.

Here are the words of a 1960s leader, no stranger to violence or tumult:

Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

- *Martin Luther King, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, December 11, 1964.*

But enough philosophical ramblings; a King has been humbled, a people abused, and the flames of war will soon paint the western horizon. Rome has wronged Bran Mak Morn, and they must pay!

A Most Howardian Theme

First, let's set the stage for newcomers and those who haven't re-read this classic tale in awhile. Bran Mak Morn is the last true king of the Picts. The year is sometime before the fall of the Roman Empire; Rome has pushed the Picts northward, but never really conquered them.

Bran Mak Morn, posing as an ambassador amongst the Roman legions, witnesses the execution of a Pict who was tricked in the marketplace, then whacked around for sport. When the Pict fought back and slew his foe, he was sentenced to death.

As the story opens, Bran, posing as ambassador Partha Mac Othna, witnesses Roman justice at its worst. Inflamed to passionate fury, he vows vengeance, eventually enlisting the aid of the most loathsome creatures alive.

Bran hatches a plan so terrible, so fraught with peril, that his very soul is up for grabs. While he sleeps, the trusted Pictish wizard Gonar the Wise travels to him, to argue against the path he fears Bran will tread. Here's some of that exchange:

"...in the name of the gods, Bran," expostulated the wizard, "take your vengeance in another way! Return to the heather -- mass your warriors -- join with Cormac and his Gaels, and spread a sea of blood and flame the length of the great Wall!"

"All that I will do," grimly answered Bran. "But now -- now -- I will have a vengeance such as no Roman ever dreamed of! Ha, what do they know of the mysteries of this ancient isle, which sheltered strange life long before Rome rose from the marshes of the Tiber?"

"Bran, there are weapons too foul to use, even against Rome!"

"Ha! There are no weapons I would not use against Rome! My back is to the wall...By steel and fire I will fight her -- and by subtlety and treachery -- by the thorn in the foot, the adder in the path, the dagger in the dark; aye," his voice sank somberly, "and by the worms of the earth!"

So now the table is set. Bran will search out the worms -- a retro people -- to tumble the haughty Romans. He will seek out a door, a conduit, in order to make contact with the loathsome creatures that rule the dark nether regions underfoot.

The 'worms' are half-man, half snake creatures that populated the British Isles before the coming of the Picts. Howard ever worked this main passion: that civilizations come and go, like waves at the beach, and that the maggots of corruption overtake all. He drew up the worm-people as a serpent-like, slant-eyed and mottled people who lived in the darkness and sometimes stole forth at night to steal children from their cribs. Loathsome, disgusting, abhorrent -- how many heavy-duty adjectives can he heap on these foul creatures? They are as repellent as any Howard ever conjured up.

Of course, this is on purpose. Howard needed to set up a grand juxtaposition between Bran Mak Morn, of pure and clean descent, with these inbred, sun-fearing, flesh eating vermin. Keep in mind the description of Bran:

"He was dark, but he did not resemble the Latins around him. There was about him none of the warm, almost Oriental sensuality of the Mediterranean which colored their features... Not his were the full curving lips, nor the rich waving locks suggestive of the Greek. Nor was his dark complexion the rich olive of the south; rather it was the bleak darkness of the north."

Howard also made sure to remind us of the purity of Bran Mak Morn with these two passages:

"Bran met the silent men of the fen, reticent, dark of eye and hair, speaking a strange mixed tongue whose long-blended elements had forgotten their pristine separate sources. Bran recognized a certain kinship in these people to himself, but he looked on them with the scorn of a pure-blooded patrician for men of fixed strains."

"...the chiefs of Bran's folk had kept their blood from foreign taint since the beginnings of time, and he himself was a pure-bred Pict of the Old Race."

What Howard has given us is a continuum: first, the Romans, the new world order, the handsome and fair, then one step down to the Picts, reeling under pressure from the Romans, not as handsome, not as strong; then one step further down the ladder to the unspeakable slime who move within the earth itself. Those finely etched handholds on the scale of human evolution are as purposeful as any sword-stroke or war-cry; in a short, compact story such as this, you have to trust that Howard does everything on purpose, everything with an eye toward pace, meter and outcome.

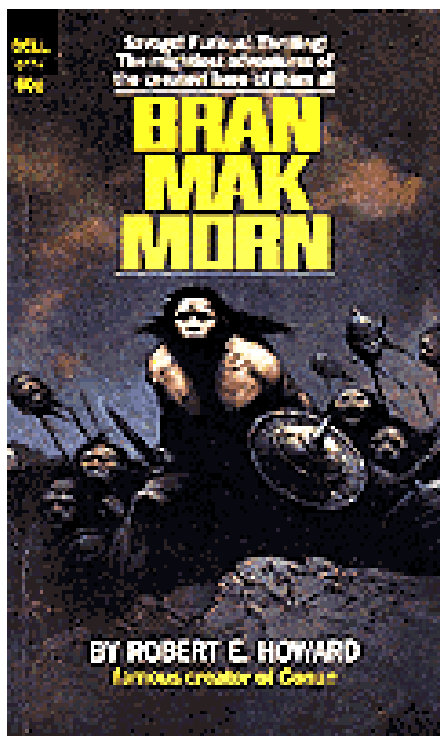
Picturing the Picts

War and politics have always made for strange bedfellows. Howard has given us the Romans, handsome, haughty, and drunk with power, requiring respect and swaggering with aristocratic airs, set against the Picts, whom he paints in his famous essay "short, stocky, with thick, gnarled limbs, beady black eyes, a low, retreating forehead, heavy jaw, and straight, coarse black hair -- my conception of a typical Pict."



If Howard ever drew his own version of a Pict, I'd like to see it. We are left with artists who let their imagination take flame. Here are two renditions; on the left is the Baen cover by Ken Kelly; on the right and below is the Dell cover by Frank Frazetta.

Kelly tends to favor cleaner lines and well-lit, heroic proportions. Frazetta was better with the somber moods and more savage aspects that Howard envisioned. While some may prefer Krenkel, I lean toward Frazetta...



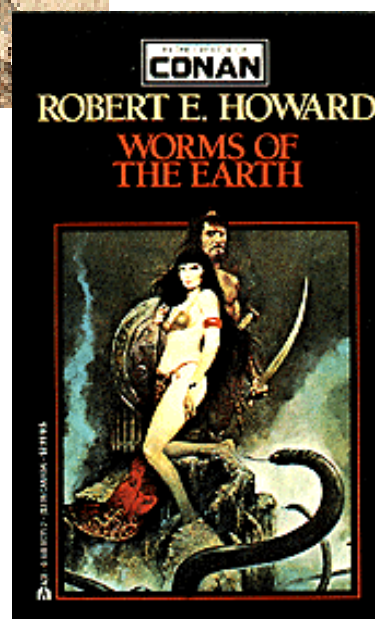
Other artists have had less luck. On the top, right is a Donald Grant edition, drawn by David Ireland. It's crudely done, but conjures up the image of the barbarian nicely.



The image to the left is by Zebra's Jeff Jones.

The vision is of a heroic warrior, although the facial detail is lacking.

Finally, on the right, is the Sanjulian image. More heroic and "civilized," one can only hope that the willing wench at his side isn't meant to be Atla, the were-woman.



Duelin' With a She-Devil

Across the bleak landscape of the sparsely inhabited regions of the British Isles tramps the Pictish King, teeth grinding. He seeks a door, and he finds it in Atla, the were-woman of the moors.

She was a sight, this were-woman. She was not old, yet evil filled her face. Her garments were ragged, her hair uncombed, and her motions were serpentine. Her ears were almost pointed, and her yellow eyes slanted curiously. She claims to know not what he seeks, but Bran knows he is now close to his goal.

"By the mottles on your skin, by the slanting of your eyes, by the taint in your veins, I speak with full knowledge and meaning."

They parley a bit; she says he hears a bird singing, or dreams empty dreams. He swears he heard a viper hiss, and will weave words no more. But she laughs when he orders her to bring the worms to him.

It is here that Howard takes us on a roller coaster of emotions that is now rising inexorably to some loathsome climax. He strings us along steadily, mostly with threats of violence but also some insinuation.

She flung back her head with a scornful laugh. His left hand locked like iron in the breast of her scanty garment and his right closed on his hilt. She laughed in his face.

"Strike and be damned, my northern wolf. Do you think that such life as mine is so sweet that I would cling to it as a babe to the breast?"

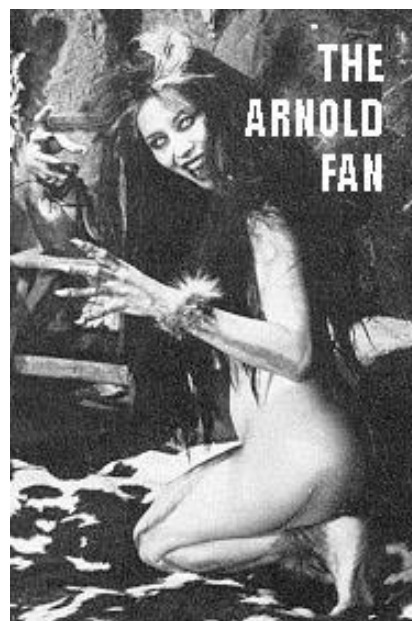
Bran would strike this witch-woman of the Dagon-moor, but when he realizes it would do no good, he flings her across the room to her unmade, grass-strewn bunk. There is a sexual suggestion here, which started with her first admonition to enter only if he would not fear to share her roof. What has he to fear within, but his own humane weakness? What would he worry about, save for losing his soul due to his consuming hate?

Since threats won't work, he promises gold, and she laughs again. Howard sets up the mocking laughter well; for there is no mirth in her laughter, only a hint of mockery, and she uses it again and again until later in the story, he threatens to send her head spinning from her body if she doesn't stop.

When threats and gold fail, he attempts to offer revenge, to kill an enemy. After all, he is on his own trail of remorseless vengeance; surely this offer will suffice? But no, she mocks him yet again, this time while splintering a dagger on his mail.

Well, then, what is left? What price can Bran pay in order to buy her cooperation?

[For those who have seen Conan the Barbarian, this witch-woman may have been the inspiration for The Deadly WOLF WITCH, played by Cassandra



Gaviola (snagged from The Arnold Fan Club at <http://members.aol.com/SMARTMONE/gift.html>.) If so, that at least shows that the CTB writers did their Howard homework. That encounter ended with her transformation into a Hyborian version of the Cat-People, then an impromptu barbecue, when the young Schwarzenegger tosses her into the fire...]

What price indeed? The following ensues:

"I will name you a price, my wolf, and it may be in days to come you will curse the armor that broke Atla's dagger!" She rose and came close to him, her disquietingly long hands fastened fiercely into his cloak. "I will tell you, Black Bran, King of Caledon! Oh, I knew you when you came into my hut with your black hair and your cold eyes! I will lead you to the doors of Hell if you wish -- and the price shall be the kisses of a king!"

...Bran eyed her somberly; he reached forth and gripped her arm in his iron fingers. An involuntary shudder shook him at the feel of her sleek skin. He nodded slowly and, drawing her close to him, forced his head down to meet her lifted lips.

More next time...the pacing, the poetry, and the passion buried just below the surface of this story. — GR

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net. Back issues - <http://www.prosalg.no/~savage/conan/publications>

NEXT Issue: Part II of *Worms of the Earth*...

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