

It is a cliché to argue that rap is nothing more than a noisy, misogynistic, homophobic rant. But compare it with the cultural inheritance of the Anglo-Saxon groups. This is from Seamus Heaney's translation of Beowulf (Faber 1999), which includes macho advice on the low value of life and the importance of having a reputation in the hood:

...do not grieve. It is always better
To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
Means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
Win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
That will be his best and only bulwark.

Move back to the Illiad, where a female slave is only a prize to be swapped, life is cheap, only reputation matters and a macho enjoyment of violence is a major element of the culture. You will be familiar with it so can probably skip these examples from Robert Fagles's translation, especially if you have recently eaten:

Patroclus, rising beside him, stabbed his right
jawbone,
Ramming the spearhead square between his teeth
so hard
He hooked him by that spearhead over the chariot
rail,
Hoisted, dragged the Trojan out as an angler
perched
On a jutting ledge drags some fish from the sea,
Some noble catch, with line and glittering bronze
hook,
So with a spear Patroclus gaffed him from his car.
His mouth gaping round the glittering point
And flipped him down face first
Dead as he fell, life breath blown away
...

... Achilles

lunged
He stabbed his temple and cleft his helmet's
cheekpiece,
None of the bronze plate could hold it – boring
through
The metal and skull the bronze spearpoint
pounded,
Demoleon's brains splattered all inside his casque
...

...Spear'd him square in the back where his war-
belt clasped,
Golden buckles clinching both halves of his
breastplate -
Straight on through went the point and out the
navel
Down in his knees he dropped –
Screaming shrill as the world went black before
him -
Clutched his bowels to his body, hunched and
sank

.. But Meriones caught him in full retreat, he let fly
With a bronze-tipped arrow, hitting his right buttock
Up under the pelvic bone so the lance pierced the
bladder.
He sank on the spot. Hunched in his dear
companion's arms,
Gasping out his life as he writhed along the ground
Like an earthworm stretched out in death, blood
pooling
Soaking the earth dark red.

(Penguin Classics 1991, 16;478-89; 20; 449-54;
20:470-75; 13:749-55.)

Now tell me why they are better than, or any different from this rap lyric:

Niggaz wanna shine like me (me), rhyme like me
(me)
Then walk around with a 9 like me (me)
They don't wanna do it, 3 to 9 like me
And they ain't strong enough to take 9 like me
Aiyoo, you think about shittin' on 50... save it
My songs belong in the Bible with King David
I teach niggaz sign language, that ain't def son
click *click* you heard that? That mean RUN

- U Not Like Me by 50 Cent, from the album Guess
Who's Back?/Get Rich or Die Tryin'. Full lyrics and
more at

http://www.ohhla.com/YFA_50cent.html#get_rich)

It may not be quite the spring rhythm of a Manley Hopkins, but its techniques are not so far from the original internal rhymes and lively mnemonic rhythms of some Anglo Saxon verse. Its cultural values are those of the Greek and Saxon heroes. Men kill each other, glorying in their reputation for bravery (=violence) because only that survives them, gives them a form of eternity and thus justifies life.

Is it that violent warrior culture is apparently admirable when it is safely in the past, but to be dismissed by sensitive readers when it gets too close innit?. Do we perhaps read, or at least praise, the classics without sufficient attention to what they convey?

Not that all raps are like that. There is a strand of Chinese rap which is actually quite gentle, albeit not very interesting as a result - <http://www.jaychoustudio.com/jay-chou-translations/secret-that-cannot-be-told/110/translation>. But now move to another line of descent -

European culture went to the West Indies. North and South America, seeking profit. Here it became mixed with the native cultures of the subdued or slave populations – African, Indian, Mexican etc. - and gave rise to a set of carnival characters that had very mixed ancestry.

One of those is the midnight robber. He wears a wide brimmed hat and cape, decorated with skulls and coffins. Parading the streets speaking *robber talk*: boastful, bombastic language full of threats, the robber gets spectators to part with their cash.

A Midnight Robber's tyranny is their revenge for their African ancestors sold into slavery. Often their speeches will criticise the establishment and seek justice for the downtrodden. The aim is to scare spectators with overblown language, which includes made up words, ensuring they part with their money to get rid of the threat. They fight with words, for these are their most powerful weapon.

The costume is reminiscent of the American cowboy with the tasselled brimmed hat and fake pistols, although the skulls hung on it, and on the cloak, It also reminds us of the Mexican Day of the Dead. The character is also rooted in the tradition of the African griot – or storyteller - and the Nigerian speeches of Ibo literature.

Here are examples of traditional robber talk:

Day I was born
the earth turned red
I have killed many men
Made dust of their bones
Lucifer could not conquer me!
- *Brian Honore*

I am the tireless clarion of the world; I cry
mankind's joys and sorrows every hour.
...Whenever I speak, a million people listen
to my voice. The Latin, the Celt, the Hun,
the Moslem, the Hindu; all comprehend me.
Charles Peace

I am the bringer of death and destruction
A thousand times more deadly than the
deadliest disease.

I spread plague over the land -
typhoid and cholera are subject to my
command.

I will call these down on you
You who dare to stand in my way
You mocking pretender!

I was old when the earth was born
The sun and stars gave birth to me
No mere human could produce such as I...

Unattribted, taken

from

[http://www.therestaurantatleverickbay.com/
center/moka_jumbies.htm](http://www.therestaurantatleverickbay.com/center/moka_jumbies.htm)

This kind of boasting is amusing when it surfaces in the old blues number like Muddy Waters and *I'm a Man*. When it gets into hard-edged urban setting as rap it sounds too real so it is rejected.