

Beowulf: tenuous relationship between movie and poem

By Margaret Rees
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Directed by Robert Zemeckis, screenplay by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary, inspired by the poem Beowulf

Heroic tales of conquest over malignant foes in the face of incredible odds always reverberate in the imagination. *Beowulf*, the famous poem written sometime between the seventh and tenth centuries in the Anglo-Saxon language known as Old English, and about the heroic battles of a brave warrior against two ogres and a dragon, has just this effect.

The poem's origins lay in oral story-telling or singing for an unlettered audience and would have probably been told over several nights of feasting. The anonymous poet further developed on this tradition to create one of the most important works in any vernacular European language in the centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire. In fact, the poem comprises one tenth of all that is left of Old English poetry. It was not, however, discovered until the sixteenth century and not published until 1815 in Copenhagen.

In recent years the 3,000-line poem, which has long been studied for its literary and historic significance, has become more accessible to modern audiences with a powerful new translation by Nobel prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney and several audio recordings. And late last year *Beowulf* became the subject of a movie by Hollywood director Robert Zemeckis (*Back to the Future* and its two sequels, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Forrest Gump* and numerous other big-budget works).

Zemeckis's *Beowulf* is the product of almost ten years of screenwriting work by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary, who were closely involved in the filming and described the movie as a "cheerfully violent and strange take on the Beowulf legend". Zemeckis was apparently scathing of the original poem, which he had been forced to study in junior high school, but responded enthusiastically to Avary and Gaiman's "treatment".

The poem is set in Scandinavia and Beowulf, from Geatland (now southern Sweden), pledges to Danish king Hrothgar that he will fight the monster Grendel who has

been preying on local inhabitants. Beowulf corners Grendel in Heorot, a large mead hall, and rips off his arm. Beowulf then has to combat Grendel's mother, who wants revenge. To do so he dives into the depths of a dreadful lake, infested with serpents. Grendel's mother tries to stab him with her sword but Beowulf eventually prevails and kills her.

As blood bubbles up in the backwash, the onlookers are afraid that the ogre has killed Beowulf but he resurfaces and, having discovered Grendel's corpse, carries the monster's head. Beowulf returns to Heorot where he is hailed by Hrothgar who gives him land and many other honors.

Finally, an aged Beowulf, who has become king of the Geats, confronts a third enemy—a dragon. The poem is replete with ominous forebodings, and this time Beowulf is tragically defeated. He is cremated according to the warrior code, with full honours on a burning pyre.

Zemeckis's movie was filmed using "performance capture technology" (a variant of CGI or computer-generated imagery) which allows filmmakers to record the physical movements of actors and translate them into animation effects. Whatever Zemeckis's intentions, the result is strange. This viewer was left wondering why the women of the Danish court had such peculiarly flat eyes and why the key actors should become odd cartoon-like characters. Anthony Hopkins is barely discernible as an aged Hrothgar, and John Malkevich as the jealous Unferth. Ray Winstone bears so little relationship to the figure of Beowulf as to be completely unrecognisable.

A question arises whether the alterations to the story wrought by Gaiman and Avary have artistic validity. Gone is the titanic struggle against Grendel's mother—the "monstrous hell-bride," "the tarn-hag in all her monstrous strength". Instead, the filmmakers have created a beautiful siren; her only monstrous feature a whip-like tail. She has seduced Hrothgar and Grendel is their son. Beowulf in turn succumbs to the siren's temptations and fifty years later he is confronted by the fire-breathing dragon, which is also his son by Grendel's mother.

The changes could be regarded as poetic licence but as one

commentator has pointed out: “There is no clear way to visualise her on the basis of either the text of *Beowulf* or the illustrated manuscripts of the early Middle Ages. Far more than Grendel, she remains shrouded in mystery as a ‘swamp thing from hell,’ (1518) that is part beast, part human being and part she-devil” (*Visualizing Beowulf*, John D Niles).

Instead of struggling to develop this sort of character, Zemeckis depicts her as a golden beauty clad in nonsensical high heels and played by Angelina Jolie. There is no sense of the malignancy of her character in the original, and the introduction of the element of guilt to Beowulf’s make-up, for succumbing to her wiles, distorts the importance in the poem of his single-minded pursuit of his foes.

The two Hollywood writers go further, claiming that by altering the story so that Beowulf “made a pact with a demon” they have created a dramatic unity missing in the original. Avary declared in an one interview: “Suddenly the two halves of the Beowulf epic, which had always seemed so disjointed, made perfect story sense...It’s quite possible that these elements of the structure had been lost over hundreds of years of verbal telling, and further diluted by Christian monks who added elements of Christianity when they transcribed it to the parchment we now know as Ms. Cotton Vitellius A xv.”

Avary pays lip-service to “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*”, an influential essay written by JRR Tolkien in 1936 but the main point of Tolkien’s critique was to establish the poem as a coherent work of art and not just an artifact passed on by a couple of transcribers in a monastery. Furthermore, the poet, according to Tolkien, looked back to pagan times through the prism of Christianity. The poem’s Christian elements were not simply tacked on as an afterthought.

Tolkien discerned a transition from the ogres of pagan legend, being Christianised in the poet’s imagination into more abstract evil spirits, allowing “a fusion that has occurred at a given point of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion.” (Emphasis in original)

The poetic synthesis between old and new religions finds its parallels in ancient crosses and jeweled objects that combined images of both. Augustine and other missionaries to England had a policy of not destroying pagan shrines but only replacing the idols within.

Far from being disjointed, the beautiful form of the poem, with its Anglo-Saxon half-line metre emphasised by alliteration and maintaining a steady beat, has been described as “reminiscent of the slow push and pull of the oar” (*World Poetry*). The poetic language, moreover, is rich with metaphor and the use of “kenning” or poetic phrases such as “whale-road” for the sea; “heather-stepper” for a

deer and “hot bone-house” for a burning body.

Tolkien also defined the poem as a heroic elegy rather than a narrative epic; an elegy imbued with a sense of the fleeting nature of all worldly success: “As the poet looks back into the past, surveying the history of kings and warriors in the old traditions, he sees that all glory (or as we might say ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’) ends in night.”

Much of the unity of the poem lies in the imagery with which the poet conveys this elegiac tone. For example, as Hrothgar warns Beowulf at the moment of his greatest triumph:

For a brief while your strength is in bloom
But it fades quickly: and soon there will follow
Illness or the sword to lay you low,
Or a sudden fire or surge of water
Or jabbing blade or javelin from the air
Or repellent age. Your piercing eye
Will dim and darken, and death will arrive,
Dear warrior, to sweep you away.

(*Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney lines 1,761-8)

The language of the original conveys complex relationships, with the old king warning Beowulf of the fragility of life. But in Zemeckis’s movie Hrothgar is reduced to a lascivious old wretch.

The burning boat in the movie conveys something of Beowulf’s stately cremation, but nothing as concrete as the poem’s image of the hopes of a people going up in flames:

A Geat woman too sang out in grief:
With hair bound up, she unburdened herself
Of her worst fears, a wild litany
Of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
Enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
Slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

(Heaney lines 3,150-5)

Unfortunately, the elegiac qualities of the poem are not effectively translated to the screen and the “performance capture technology” only highlights the filmmakers’ one-dimensional approach. Nor, in the end, do the alterations to the story strengthen it the way the screenwriters hoped—the mystery and power of the original poem remains elusive and beyond their grasp.

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