ADAPTING *BEOWULF*: POETRY AND PLOT HOLES

by

Amalia Carkeek-Hercey

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The brute fact of translation is that it is a reading that sets out, after all its slow and passionate attention to the text, to replace its original inspiration. Perhaps all readings secretly do this. Like a commentary that obliterates what it explicates, a translation is, in the end, a gesture toward and empty space where a text used to be.

- R. M. Liuzza, *Beowulf*

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Approved: _____Stephanie Clark, Ph.D._____
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Beowulf, the Old English narrative poem, tells the story of the titular Beowulf and his heroic deeds. It is considered a classic of English literature and is commonly called an epic, despite scholarly disagreements about the usefulness and accuracy of the term as it applies to the unique poem. The question of the poem's genre has endured and developed over the course of 200 years of academic study, with various authors proposing possible options. The modern culture of mass entertainment and literacy today has encouraged lay-person engagement with the poem, generating dozens of adaptations of *Beowulf* in various mediums, including theater, graphic novels, literary novels, poetry, and films. I propose to look at a selection of academic investigations into the genre of *Beowulf* and use their findings to discuss one particular adaptation, the 2007 film *Beowulf*, and how the changes made by the film reflect an evolving understanding of the poem, and literary fiction in general, among popular audiences.

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Introduction

What do we, as modern people, make of *Beowulf*? The name is iconic, to be sure – there's a good chance that the average person who has taken an English literature class will have heard of it – but the chance that they've actually read the entire poem is much lower. It is often abridged, whittled down to the three episodes where Beowulf battles monsters. However, *Beowulf* is much more than those episodes. As a text, *Beowulf* is incredibly rich and expansive, filled with beautiful poetry, complicated dynamics of loyalty and diplomacy, and structural complexity. Readers might know the broad strokes of the story – the fight with the dragon, the mighty warrior king, Grendel attacking Heorot in the night – but when we actually sit down to read it, we find that there is much more to the story. Between these fights, the poet has filled the text with allusions to historical figures and characters from other stories, each one adding layers of depth and meaning as they widen the world of the story and reflect on leadership and responsibility. Like most works of literature, the meaning deepens the more time one spends reading *Beowulf*. The language, the structure of the story, the emotions, the characters, are all carefully crafted with a high degree of sophistication that is often missed upon a first reading, in part because it is very old and very dense. *Beowulf* originates from a time when the world of literature worked differently than it does today, a world that predates the English novel by hundreds of years. The *Beowulf* poet wasn't aiming to satisfy literary qualities that we value in popular literature today, especially when it comes to storytelling that prioritize audience comprehension and enjoyment of the story they're reading. Many of the key aspects of *Beowulf* aren't in the action-heavy parts of the story with the monsters, but rather in the subtle exchanges during feasts and formal conversations. Trying to force *Beowulf* to conform to contemporary genre conventions and modern expectations is a mistake that only leads to missing the point, and

adaptations of the story frequently do just that – simplifying and condensing the poem while forcing it into modern ideals of storytelling, rather than letting it remain intact as the complex work of literature that it is. In order to understand *Beowulf* we must read it on its own terms, without the interference of modern standards of what a satisfying story ought to look like.

Although *Beowulf* might not be very popular among the general public, it has, in the last half a century, generated countless adaptations across mediums. Films, novels, poetry, comics, and even operas retelling the story of *Beowulf* have been created, continuing the legacy of the poem. Again and again, writer after writer returns to the poem for inspiration, hoping to creatively expand upon the story with their own unique perspectives and interpretations. What makes *Beowulf* such a rich text for adaptation? One possible answer is because that's what people have always done with this story. *Beowulf* was part of an oral tradition, where it began as a story told out loud in communal spaces. It was written down later, with only a single surviving manuscript that we can use as a source of knowledge about the story. Whether there were ever other manuscripts containing the story of *Beowulf* is unknown, but all we know for sure is that the manuscript we have today was not the first iteration of the story. The process of retelling is inherent to the legacy of the poem, a legacy that contemporary storytellers carry on with great enthusiasm. The text of the poem itself reflects an interest in the past world, as the period that the poet depicts took place hundreds of years before the manuscript was written. That fascination has persisted throughout the centuries, even as the temporal gulf widens.

Despite *Beowulf*'s continued popularity as a creative outlet, almost none of these adaptations attract any substantial mainstream attention. This paper focuses on two adaptations of *Beowulf* that take very different approaches to the poem. The most well-known adaptation is Robert Zemeckis' 2007 film *Beowulf*, which applied modern technology to the story by making it fully

CGI animated, with actors in motion-capture suits acting out scenes that were later painted over with computer graphics, a choice that some audience members found strange and off-putting. It might have been a technologically innovative film, but what were the people who made it trying to achieve? What were they revealing about the story? By turning *Beowulf* into an action-adventure film, they were perhaps trying to make *Beowulf* digestible for mass audiences by repackaging it, trimming and adjusting it into something more palatable and pleasing, removing its alien qualities for the sake of enjoyment. In contrast, Meghan Purvis's "new translation" (or as I see it, adaptation) of *Beowulf* transforms the language from Old English convention to contemporary poetic form, emphasizing sensory detail and fleshing out background characters in a way that personalizes and enlivens the text for readers who are used to modern literature. Although her adaptation is less popular than the film, it represents a different mode of adaptation, one that explores personal relationships and feelings about the poem. Purvis is also making *Beowulf* more digestible and legible for the sake of literary enjoyment, but her adaptation does not use technological spectacle and action genre tropes to interest an audience. Both adaptations utilize different aspects of the text in accordance with the genre they use to tell the story, showing that *Beowulf* has many possible interpretations and cannot be reduced to a single genre. Interestingly, the scholarship on the poem shows similar wrestling with the genre of *Beowulf*. I argue that both the scholarship and adaptations show the way that readers' understanding of the poem's genre influences the way they interpret and understand (or misunderstand) the poem.

Chapter 1: Genre

Because *Beowulf* is such an old text, it uses elements of storytelling differently than we do today. One of these elements is genre, which has become prevalent in media today in the form of genre fiction, a relatively new development in literary history. *Beowulf* existed long before the concept of genre fiction as we understand it today developed, but it utilizes genre conventions specific to the literary culture from which it emerged in Early Medieval England. This massive temporal gulf between the original poem and modern adaptations necessitates a reckoning with the issue of genre, as anyone wanting to adapt the poem must find a way to bring the ancient poem to contemporary audiences who most likely don't have any knowledge or context for Early Medieval literature. This often leads to adaptations using genre fiction conventions that were totally alien to the world of the poet and the culture that created the story, therefore changing the overall meaning of the poem and making it impossible to have an equivalent experience with the text that reading an accurate translation provides. Film in particular as a visual medium has led to massive transformation of the poem in the handful of *Beowulf* film adaptations that exist, leaning into the action-adventure elements of the story and cutting out huge aspects of the text. As a result, the tone is much more in line with generic "medieval heroism" rather than the dignified and somber language of the poem.

Genre is popularly understood in the world of film and literature to delineate categories according to similarities in style, aesthetics, themes, and subject matter, and has been used commonly as a marketing strategy to attract audiences. Genre as a field of academic study is not exclusively interested in storytelling; in his book *Genre,* John Frow discusses the broader definition of the term, which applies to life in general: "Genre is, amongst other things, a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organizing things into recognizable classes" (56). If we think

about genre this way, free from its literary associations, then the experience of existing is the constant activity of recognizing and dictating genres. We distinguish a text from an email, a lawn chair from an office chair, in the same way we distinguish a rom-com from a tragedy – by seeing the similar features they share with other things, and the features they lack. Genre as a quality of fictional media is unavoidable in popular culture; every studio film's marketing is based on audiences recognizing what kind of film it is and deciding to go see it because they've liked similar films in the past. They play into our previous knowledge and experiences with other novels or films, and they put up a flag to let us know that, hey, this is something we might like. A trailer for a horror movie will have ominous music, flickering lights, a sense of tension, a few creepy shots hinting at a monster or a ghost. A romance has light, happy music, a couple laughing and smiling at each other, and warm, sunny colors. These elements are selectively chosen to create interest in the film, and, importantly, they are universal enough to be instantly recognizable to their target audience.

Promotional material like trailers, blurbs, and posters exist for financial purposes, not artistic, a modern concern that didn't exist for Early Medieval literature. These promotional materials rely on genre conventions to attract their audiences, especially for popular genres like fantasy, romance, and young adult fiction. The concept of marketing entertainment to an audience on a mass scale was irrelevant when *Beowulf* was written because mass media itself did not exist in the Early Middle Ages. There was no singular version of a story in oral storytelling culture, and knowledge of written literature was limited to the literate minority of the population. There was also no financial demand that a work of literature be successful, as there is today in the publishing industry. Today, if an author wants to make it to the shelves of Barnes and Noble, they must work with an agent to court publishers and make a case for the future success of their book,

which involves knowing who will want to read it. This system isn't limited to genre fiction; all new literature that gets broadly distributed, like literary fiction and non-fiction, gets the marketing treatment because it is intended for general audiences. Academic literature is an exception because of its niche audience, and these books do not enter the mass market. Elements of mass marketing like blurbs, reviews, and social media promotion apply to some academic publishing, but on a much smaller scale than mainstream book releases. Georgetown University's guide to scholarly publishing even recommends friends, family, and colleagues as an audience that the author should capitalize on, demonstrating the modest distribution that the majority of these publications achieve. This micro-audience-targeted distribution model is probably closer to Old English literature than Barnes and Noble, as literature itself was a niche reserved only for the small minority of educated people who were literate at the time. The publishing industry only began in the first place with the invention of the printing press in the 1440s, when literature could be standardized and mass distributed. Despite this, it took a long time for the general public to become literate. In Britain, according to Dominic Selwood, literacy was still at about 50% until the 1850s, not reaching over 95% until the end of the 19th century. The place of literature in the lives of everyday people has expanded greatly in the past 150 years, with reading becoming a primary source of entertainment in a way it had never been before.

Going back to Early Medieval England, before machine printing, before mass literacy, it's evident that the *Beowulf* poet was working in a culture where literature had a dramatically different role than it does in our modern world. It's hard to imagine an audience for the poem with this context, and scholars have not determined who that audience might have been. R.D. Fulk et al. have suggested monastic communities and courts, and possibly lay people as well, but it was likely not a broadly known poem among the Anglo-Saxon people. With this context, it

makes sense in some ways that the poem is considered challenging and unapproachable literature to general audiences; it doesn't have a history of being widely read until the late 19th century, when it gained a reputation as classical literature. It is also likely the only piece of Old English literature that general audiences will have ever heard of, so there's no time for casual readers to develop a familiarity with the style. One thing that readers can take comfort in is the knowledge that *Beowulf* is a unique text that is hard even for scholars to pin down, as it defies simple genre classification and has few surviving types of texts to use as comparisons.

In choosing between two options, it's more appropriate to call *Beowulf* literary or classical fiction rather than genre fiction, but that label is so broad that it doesn't help describe what the poem actually *is* in any substantial way. 'Literary fiction' was not a descriptor that applied to Old English literature; indeed, people at the time only made limited genre distinctions, with some evidence showing an understanding of meaningful difference between poetry and prose, but not extending to more specific genre classifications as we make them today. Jonathan Davis-Secord discusses genre in Old English literature, advocating the view that genre is an ahistorical and anachronistic concept that modern scholars retroactively apply, rather than being intentionally constructed at the time when the works were written. Still, there are distinct genres of Old English literature which scholars have developed, many of which appear throughout *Beowulf* at various parts of the narrative. Joseph Harris proposes the idea that *Beowulf* is an anthology of genres, saying that "The *Beowulf*ian *summa* includes genealogical verse, a creation hymn, elegies, a lament, a heroic lay, a praise poem, historical poems, a flyting, heroic boasts, gnomic verse, a sermon, and perhaps less formal oral genres. In addition, a number of other genres are alluded to …" (17).

He continues this interpretation to suggest that *Beowulf* is "a genre *sui generis*" (20), that it is a unique genre all of its own that cannot be adequately described by a single label, which, if we take it to be true, presents a conundrum when adapting the poem forthe modern day.

Chapter 2: Epic

Even if the *Beowulf* poet wasn't working in a specific, pre-established genre, it doesn't mean that he was composing a work completely removed from the context of literature that had come before. *Beowulf* has been called an "epic" by some scholars, including C. Hugh Holman, who defines an epic as "a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race" (194). This definition basically seems to fit *Beowulf* – it is certainly a long narrative poem (the longest in Old English literature at 3,182 lines); the central character, Beowulf, is in a high position as a respected leader among his people; he is of heroic proportions; and the narrative takes place over a series of episodic adventures in two different nations. *Beowulf* is also important to the history of several nations: there are some Danish and Swedish characters who are referenced in other texts, both fictional and historical, and the tribes of the Danes and the Geats were real groups with some factual history of war between them.

However, Holman has to minimize other features of *Beowulf*, including the setting which he says must be "vast in scope, covering great nations, the world or the universe" and the convention of divine interference: "supernatural forces – gods, angels, and demons – interest themselves in the action and intervene from time to time" (194). The scope of *Beowulf* is arguably not as great as implied by the word "epic" – it covers a (relatively) small area of the world, with only a few kingdoms of the same regional ethnicity involved in the narrative. In fact, the tribes warring with each other are all well-known to each other, often with close family ties. Outside the immediate action of the story, however, there are appeals to a legendary past that make the scope of the story greater. As for the second common characteristic that *Beowulf* does

not cleanly map onto, divine intervention is not entirely absent from the story, but it is much less explicit than in other epics. There are moments when Beowulf is in battle and uses a strength that originates from beyond himself to defeat his monstrous enemies, but it is not usually as straight-forward as a specific deity who comes down to earth and speaks to the hero. In the battle with Grendel's mother the poet gets as definitive as possible to say that "halig God / geweold wigsigor; witig Drihten, / rodera Rædend hit on ryht gesced" (holy God / brought about war-victory – the wise Lord, / Ruler of the heavens, decided it rightly, ll. 1553-1555)[1]. Instances of this can be more subtle though, simply saying that "Beowulfe wearð / guðhreð gyfeþe" (Beowulf was given / glory in battle, ll. 818-819). The deity in *Beowulf* is sometimes called God, but it is also a more general sense of fate or destiny that decides Beowulf's victory or defeat in battle. This is unlike the *Odyssey*, for example, when the gods literally speak to the heroes and act as whole characters in the story to influence the outcomes they desire. This lens invites a reading of *Beowulf* as a work of great classic literature, placing it on the same level as other epics. The definition is most useful for a high school English class approach to *Beowulf*, an audience reading the text to gain general knowledge about significant works of literature without looking much further into the cultural context of Old English literature.

In a move towards greater specificity, Stanley Greenfield identifies *Beowulf* as epic tragedy, with an epic hero at the center. The purpose of his article is to differentiate between dramatic and epic tragedy, and he conclusively places *Beowulf* on the side of the epic, as opposed to Shakespearean plays like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, which he sees as definitively belonging to the category of dramatic tragedy. A major reason for making this distinction is the scale of the tragedy that epic implies: "[Catastrophe] is otherwise with epic tragedy. There, I suggest, the fate

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[1] All *Beowulf* translations by R. M. Liuzza

of the hero implies the end of the city or the passing of a way of life, not a cleansing or a reformation" (95). He goes on to explain that upon Beowulf's death, his people-group is on the precipice of downfall – it is not just Beowulf who is defeated at the end. This puts the tragedy on a grander scale. The hero is also inherently more connected to his people in an epic tragedy: "In the world of tragic drama … though the hero may be a king and concerned for his people, he is in important ways isolated from them in his values and goals. Between his aims and society's yawns a gulf of doubt and uncertainty" (94). Beowulf is intimately connected with his people throughout the poem, as part of the historic tradition of leaders that we see time and time again in the narrative digressions. He is the agent of Hygelac and becomes the king of the Geats, representing and guiding his nation throughout the hardships and conflicts they face. Beowulf cannot be separated from the Geats – if so, he would cease to be Beowulf and would be a generic monster fighter. It is because he fights for his people and not for himself that he is an epic hero, following Greenfield's reasoning. His goals and purpose for fighting are inherently entwined with the wellbeing of the Geats and the Danes.

In understanding *Beowulf* as an epic tragedy, Greenfield elevates the story above mere drama in the realm of spirituality as well, showing that the text's relationship with cosmic will and destiny transcends the merely human into the epic. In an epic story, Greenfield says that "Destiny seems to brood over the vast abyss of epic life and subsume human will to its purposes. Tragic drama, on the other hand, while informed by a cosmic sense, denies, it seems to me, an intimacy between the universe and its hero" (96). Fate is a frequent presence in *Beowulf*, deciding the destinies of every man. When Beowulf first arrives in Hrothgar's hall, he gives a speech announcing his intention to fight Grendel. However, he does not claim that he will be the victor right away. Instead, he puts the responsibility of deciding who will win into the hands of

God, or *wyrd*: "Ðær gelyfan sceal / Dryhtnes dome, se þe hine deað nimeð" (Let him put his faith / in the Lord's judgement, whom death takes! ll. 440-41). Beowulf ends his speech with an affirmation that fate is the ultimate power, saying "Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel" (Wyrd always goes as it must! l. 455). Greenfield's focus allows us to see a kind of humility in the poem, an ethos that the conflicts in life are, to some extent, predetermined and out of the control of the individual. Greenfield's thoughts about destiny subsuming human will in an epic tragedy apply well to *Beowulf*. It is less that Beowulf is an individual defeating monsters out of some great internal strength of will, and more that he is the vessel of divine power, embodying the role of a hero. When Beowulf fights the dragon at the end of the poem, it doesn't feel like he has much choice in the matter – by nature of being an epic hero, he is obliged to fulfill his responsibilities and face his fate. This is the nature of his intimate relationship with destiny, where he understands that he is tied to a force greater than himself, and he does not fight against that responsibility.

Greenfield concludes his article by reflecting on the overall meaning of stories that fall under the "epic" rather than the "dramatic". In his words, "epic touches on the brevity of human life and on the wonder of man's achievements; tragic drama questions the mystery of life and wonders at man's endurance … epic tragedy arouses poignancy and awe; dramatic tragedy, admiration and compassion" (101). If we read *Beowulf* as an epic, then, we are not really meant to personally relate to Beowulf as a character the way we tend to relate to characters in modern fiction. The purpose of a story like *Beowulf*, an epic tragedy, is to inspire wonder at the super-heroic feats within and to feel sad at the inevitable end of such a life, but not to resist the way things are. In epic drama, it is accepted that the ultimate fate of humans is outside their control, and there is no fear or anxiety about that fact. Instead of being angsty or neurotic about the

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purpose of life, we are meant to appreciate the greatness that heroes can accomplish in their time in the world, and perhaps aspire to accomplish something great ourselves – the genre inspires amazement and admiration rather than discontent. A tragic drama, on the other hand, reflects characters struggling to understand the greater cosmic design, or being unsure that there is one at all, a point of view that encourages identification with uncertainty. The epic, then, is possibly more peaceful and reassuring than the drama because it is elevated beyond the human scale, allowing us to avoid thinking about ourselves when we read it and simply sit in awe of the greatness unfolding before us. Calling *Beowulf* an epic tragedy rather than simply an epic gets closer to the actual content of the poem, bringing our attention to the themes and offering a possible way for readers to understand and emotionally connect to the story. This genre classification might reflect an audience that reads the poem out of personal interest and enjoyment rather than educational obligation.

Critics have questioned the usefulness of that term "epic" at all as applicable to the text.[2] For one thing, the term is so broad as to be unspecific as to the actual content and meaning of the text. In the introduction to *Klaeber's Beowulf 4th Edition*, R.D. Fulk et. al say that "The term 'epic', though habitually used of *Beowulf,* has little to recommend it other than convenience, for the poem is quite unlike the major Western works of that genre from Homer to Milton … While the defining phrase 'long heroic poem set in the antique Northern past' may lack elegance, perhaps there is no more adequate way to describe this particular enterprise" (clxxxvi). This suggests that 'epic' is merely the easiest way to describe the poem for the sake of efficiency, but not for the sake of accuracy. Indeed, there is no one single term that accurately describes the

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[2] Further reading: Joseph Harris, *Oral Tradition* (2000) and John D. Niles *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism, with Selected Readings* (2016)

poem. J.R.R. Tolkien rejected the notion that *Beowulf* is an epic entirely: "Beowulf is not an 'epic', not even a magnified 'lay.' No terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather 'elegy'" (38). His perspective was that *Beowulf* is first and foremost a work of poetic expression, and a tragic one at that. He also rejects the notion that it could be simplified into anything less than a poem, giving the allegory of men who tear a stone tower apart in the search for secrets hidden within, completely ignoring its purpose as a viewpoint for overlooking the sea. In reading *Beowulf* exclusively as a history of German culture, as scholars primarily did at the time, Tolkien believes that they forgot its value as a work of artistic expression. He discusses other *Beowulf* scholars, who apparently believed that it was of much poorer quality when compared to the work of Homer and Virgil, saying: "But I will for the moment remark only that, if it is so, Beowulf is evidently not a well-conducted epic. It may turn out to be no epic at all" (16). This criticism comes from a struggle to appreciate the narrative structure of the poem, which felt overly simplistic to scholars of this age. Tolkien cites W.P. Ker as an example, who said this:

> The fault of Beowulf is that there is nothing much in the story. The hero is occupied in killing monsters, like Hercules or Theseus. But there are other things in the lives of Hercules and Theseus besides the killing of the Hydra or of Procrustes. Beowulf has nothing else to do, when he has killed Grendel and Grendel's mother in Denmark: he goes home to his own Gautland, until at last the rolling years bring the Fire-drake and his last adventure. It is too simple. (14)

In this vein of criticism, Ker compares *Beowulf* to Greek mythology and finds that the comparison is unsatisfactory; that it fails to live up to, in his opinion, much more richly developed figures with fuller stories. By forcing the poem to compete with other literatures, we miss the original qualities it possesses.

Chapter 3: Elegy

Tolkien found that the most important features of the poem are the language – the literal poetry – and the themes the poet expresses through that language. The word 'elegy' is Tolkien's preference. He explains it as "an heroic-elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3,136 lines are the prelude to a dirge: *him þa gegiredan Geata leode ad ofer eorðan unwaclicne*: one of the most moving ever written" (38), translated by Liuzza as "The people of the Geats then prepared for him / a splendid pyre upon the earth," ll. 3137-3138. These lines are from the final section of the poem, which describes Beowulf's funeral and the grieving of his people upon losing him. Following Holman's definition of 'elegy' as "a sustained and formal poem setting forth the poet's meditations upon death or another solemn theme" (183), this passage from *Beowulf* is indeed an elegy that captures the pain that comes with the loss of a community's leader and protector and the uncertainty that the future holds following this loss. Tolkien evidently finds this quite profound, finds the poet's language beautiful and mournful, and believes that this emotional effect is the purpose of the poem. He summarizes *Beowulf* as a whole as "a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death" (34). For him, to try to analyze the poem within the framework is not valuable because that is not what the poem is ultimately trying to be – instead, he reads *Beowulf* through its themes of the inevitable passing of time, the sadness of a life that is fated to end. It is a much more personal and humble approach to the poem, one that cuts through the noise of criticism and picking-apart to make a deeper connection with the person who authored it, a person Tolkien sees as "a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical" (32).

Through understanding *Beowulf* as an elegiac work, Tolkien ends up identifying with the poet in an interesting way. In reading the poem, he becomes quite emotionally close to the author, who was himself writing about something from a half-imagined past. By reading *Beowulf* as a primarily poetic work of expression, Tolkien creates a continuum of experience, a common melancholy in reflecting on the past and even on the reader's own life. Funerals open and close the poem; they are where the story begins and ends, and it is where all our stories will eventually end as well, including the *Beowulf* poet and all the readers of the poem. Reading *Beowulf* as an elegy, as Tolkien does, brings it down to the human level in meaningful ways that universally connect it to the shared experience of living. We are not all legendary heroes, but Tolkien suggests that the specifics and the machinations of the plot matter less than the fundamental themes and feelings it carries through the centuries and into the present. In reading the poem as elegy, Tolkien notices the human elements everyone has in common that Ker's and Holman's readings as epic miss. This genre classification appeals to a literary readership who might be authors and poets themselves, people who appreciate linguistic craft and artistry.

I believe all of these interpretations work together to explain something about what *Beowulf* means to readers today. Collectively, they encompass several possible audiences for the poem outside of academic scholarship. However, we experience these things differently today than back when the poem was first told and eventually written down. The epic poem is not currently a popular medium amongst the general population. Instead of sitting around a fire and listening to someone tell a story, we primarily consume stories through film, television, and books. Superhero fiction, one of the closer analogies to the epic hero in the vein of *Beowulf*, has been one of the most consistently popular genres for the past 80 years. The character of the superhero is epic in scale, capable of doing deeds far beyond the abilities of regular people, and

fights monsters and villains that at least meet, if not far surpass, the threat of *Beowulf*'s enemies. There is still a demand for heroic tales, but we also expect those stories to be narratively straightforward and satisfying in a way that *Beowulf* simply is not for popular audiences. So what are creatives to do when trying to adapt *Beowulf*? When they try to reimagine the poem and reinterpret it so that it can be enjoyed in the form that audiences are familiar with, what aspects of the poem do they emphasize, what do they ignore, and what effects do they try and achieve? I've picked three modes of storytelling from Tolkien's and Greenfield's writing – poetry, epic tragedy, and dramatic tragedy – that I want to apply to the adaptations in order to see which mode, if any, an adaptation embodies and what that means as far as understanding *Beowulf*.

Chapter 4: *Beowulf* (2007)

The most famous adaptation, Robert Zemeckis' 2007 motion-capture animated film *Beowulf*, is the most expensive and most ambitious attempt to bring the story to mass audiences in the form of a gruesome thrill-ride. The writers, Roger Avary and Neil Gaiman, are decidedly non-academic in their approach to the poem. Their primary intention in crafting the story of the film was to fill in what they saw as gaps in the poem, and to unite the two halves into a narratively continuous whole. In *Beowulf: The Script Book*, Roger Avary writes about how he and Gaiman both identified plot holes in the poem and questions they needed answers to, and so they took the liberties of coming up with answers. In his notes, Avary wrote: "If Grendel is half-man, half-demon... then who is his father? Why does Grendel never attack Hrothgar, the king? How does Beowulf hold his breath for days on end during the fight with Grendel's Mother? Maybe he wasn't fighting her? Or maybe he isn't human?" (11). Avary's goal, as he states, is this: "It was my intention to remain true to the letter of the epic, but I would read between the lines and find greater truths than had been explored before." (12). In his desire to come to a greater truth about the poem, Avary falls victim to the same trap that Tolkien writes about in this essay, where he points out the tendency of critics to miss what really matters about the poem. Tolkien says, "Stories and plots must sometimes have seemed triter to him, the much-read, than they did to the old poets and their audiences. The dwarf on the spot sometimes sees things missed by the travelling giant ranging many countries" (9). In trying to solve the poem like a puzzle, Avary and Gaiman interpret *Beowulf* from the perspective of the giant rather than the dwarf, stepping from plot point to plot point instead of line to line, when much of the great beauty of the poem is contained in the language and much of the meaning is in subtle juxtapositions of images and ideas. Avary acknowledges some appreciation of the poem's craft

when he writes of his initial impression of the poem, writing "When spoken, the texture of the writing comes alive, and with breath the arcane nature of the language somehow finds life" (11).

Yet, instead of incorporating the flow of the language into the screenplay, the writers drop poetry altogether from the film in favor of a realistic aesthetic and plot-driven story. Gone is the graceful and lavish language, replaced by a vision of Early Medieval Denmark full of mud and animalistic people, where men are arrogant and sex obsessed. *Beowulf* was never a poem about realism; applying realistic human grotesquery to the poem adds little depth. Hrothgar in the film is crude and almost senile, a fundamentally weak man who let himself be seduced by a monster, Grendel's mother, because she promises power, a mistake which literally follows him in the form of Grendel, a deformed creature who kills his people. This Hrothgar can hardly be called "*god cyning*" (good king, l. 863); he is embarrassing. Even his wife is disgusted by him. One could reasonably conclude that he deserves Grendel's attacks, a view that does not seem to be reflected in the original narrative, where Hrothgar is a genuinely noble man whose afflictions arouse audience sympathy. The characters of the poem may be perceived as archetypical and therefore may be called a more simplistic depiction of humanity, but this interpretation comes from a lack of comprehensive reading. In the poem, much of the complexity is subtle and subtextual, and the poet refrains from outright telling the audience what to think. The supposedly more sophisticated characters that Gaiman and Avary came up with didn't do much for critics; in his review, Roger Ebert dropped this line: "The movie is also showing in non-IMAX 3-D, and in the usual 2-D. Not bad for a one-dimensional story." Ebert is not the ultimate arbitrator of story quality, but his impression of the film's storytelling as one-dimensional unfortunately does not speak highly to the effectiveness of the changes Gaiman and Avary made in trying to modernize the poem. It also

reflects poorly on the original poem – if Zemeckis's film is more narratively complex according to Avary, what does that say about his comprehension of the source material?

Is Beowulf, in either the poem or the film, a rounded, complex character? Ebert would likely say no. Outside of scholarly analysis, Beowulf is popularly seen as a simple character. He is a strong leader with loyal men, he follows the conventions of his culture, he does what needs to be done in an emergency, he bravely accepts his death – he is not a character with much, if any, internal drama. Beowulf simply fits his role as a hero to his people, and steadily continues to do so. His sense of loyalty is strong, and unquestioned by the narrative. Beowulf has no romantic attachments; he has no distinction between his personal and professional life – there is no private Beowulf. What Beowulf does possess is a powerful commitment to bringing glory to his lord Hygelac and serving his kingdom as the need arises. Even at the moment of his death, he does not show fear or regret. He merely says this: "'Ealle wyrd forspeoft / mine magas to metodsceafte, / eorlas on elne. Ic him æfter sceal' / Þæt wæs þam gomelan gingæste word" ('Fate has swept away / all of my kinsmen, earls in their courage, / to their final destiny; I must follow them.' / That was the last word of the old warrior, ll. 2815-2818). He is spiritually at peace, ready to join his dead companions in the afterlife. It is a deeply sad moment for Wiglaf to see his lord die before his eyes, but there's the consolation that his death was deeply heroic – Beowulf has succeeded at his final endeavor, killing a dragon in service to his people. He may seem to be a generic hero – virtuous, gracious, and capable – but the poet hints at a potential fall from grace throughout, inserting narratives about other kings and warriors who were excessively violent, vengeful, or selfish, and warning Beowulf to take care in order to avoid ending up like them.

With no personal life and no obvious interior conflict, Beowulf may indeed be called one-dimensional by storytellers today. This is a crucial obstacle that modern writers must face when

trying to adapt the poem into any medium that they want to be received by a mainstream audience. According to some writers' basic rules of storytelling, fiction is divided into flat characters and round characters. Beowulf is a flat character; his existence revolves around a single purpose and idea while modern fiction favors round characters. James Hynes, in his Great Courses guidebook to fiction writing, says that flat characters can also be valuable in fiction because of their immediate recognition by readers. Once Beowulf appears for the first time, we know exactly what to expect from him and what kind of character he is – a powerful, heroic leader. Hynes also points out that some stories rely completely on flat characters, using the example of Sherlock Holmes as a character who does not change or do anything that surprises readers. Hynes also notes that round characters have a richness and multifaceted quality that flat characters are missing. Like real people, round characters have dimensionality and are capable of appearing many different ways in different contexts. Unlike, say, the March sisters from *Little Women*, who have moments of strength and weakness, constantly developing relationships with one another, and growth throughout the novel, Beowulf could never be mistaken for a real, complicated person.

In making Hrothgar and Beowulf vulnerable to seduction, willing to cheat their way to power, and responsible for creating the very monsters that plague them, Gaiman and Avary may have been trying to create a dimensionality and richness that the original poem does not have. Again, complex and realistic characters evidently didn't matter to the *Beowulf* poet – the idea of surprising the audience or subverting their expectations doesn't appear to be a feature of Old English literature. So-called 'flat' characters, like Hynes says, are useful because they are immediately emotionally recognizable and memorable. As the central figure of the poem, Beowulf's usefulness is as a strong, constant figure whom we can follow from scene to scene as

the forces of politics, loyalty, divinity, and violence compel him forward through the story. However useful a flat character can be for a grand thematic poem like *Beowulf*, those traits don't translate very well for the plot-driven action film that Gaiman and Avary wanted to make. They were unsatisfied with what they took to be the simplicity of the poem; surely there must be something that the poet wasn't telling us, there must be gaps in the narrative, because no real person can possibly live up to the Beowulf of the poem. In real life there are no purely noble heroes. In assuming some type of realism for the genre, the Beowulf of the poem just doesn't make sense. It's hard to have a compelling character without doubts or flaws, and so they probed into the unanswered questions of the story to find where any human weak spots might have been hidden for the sake of maintaining a heroic image. This interpretative choice deviates from the original themes and effect of the poem to the extent that the question of whether it's even telling the same story at all is up for question.

If Gaiman and Avary read *Beowulf* as an epic, then it makes sense that they would see the story as a generic heroic tale and would therefore be unsatisfied with the narrative. Avary even says that "It was during a high school English lit class that I was first exposed to the epic poem *Beowulf*. It was the Burton Raffel translation, and its cover depicted, in stained-glass styling, a warrior driving a sword into a fiery red dragon" (11). For one thing, Avary directly calls it an epic poem, which corresponds with my belief that this term is most useful in the context of general English education. He also says that the cover illustration, which gives the impression of generic monster-slaying heroism, was one of the selling points of the book for him. *Beowulf* was marketed to him in a somewhat misleading way, promising a Dungeons & Dragons-style narrative that doesn't prime readers for the stranger, subtler, less generic content of the actual poem. Putting the dragon on the cover of *Beowulf* makes it look like epic fantasy, a

misconception that seems to have persisted for Avary as evidenced by the way he continues to write about the poem.

To see how the dramatic change in character alters the story, we can go back to Tolkien and Greenfield and compare their interpretations of the poem to the film. The reflections on death that Tolkien valued so highly in the poem are gone from this adaptation – some of the themes in this film are guilt, unreliable storytelling, and responsibility, with death and cosmic destiny taking a backseat. Tolkien disregarded the notion that *Beowulf* is a narrative poem entirely and did not see it as a singular sequential story. Instead, he said that the poem is "a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death" (12). In this reading, the specific character of Beowulf the person is insignificant – he is merely the canvas upon which the balance is struck. He represents any "great life," and the specific circumstances of his rising and setting are inconsequential in the face of the universally understandable feeling of achieving something in life and then succumbing to the inevitable pull of age. Though flat, this Beowulf is genuinely heroic, and it is because of his uncomplicated and non-specific greatness that the story resonates so clearly. The Beowulf in the 2007 film has a different path through life, however. He doesn't embody true greatness and heroism in the same way Beowulf of the poem does, where both physical and moral strength are integral to his character. Instead, this Beowulf achieves a superficial greatness of kingship and glory without doing the actual work true greatness demands. By making a deal with a Grendel's mother, where, instead of killing her, she seduces him and demands that he give her a son in exchange for power, he cheats his way to the throne. In the end, this moral failing comes back to haunt him in the form of the son he gave her fifty years ago: a dragon which he must literally battle to the death.

This Beowulf brings his downfall upon himself in one unified narrative arc; the consequences of his youth finally catch up to him in his old age. The main difference between the original poem and Gaiman/Avary's interpretation seems to be a disagreement about human nature. According to the *Beowulf* poet heroes are noble and dignified, while Gaiman and Avary don't show a belief in genuine innate morality of character. Instead, their revision of the poem represents the belief that humans are corruptible and weak, that any greatness is morally tainted, and everyone has dark secrets. If Tolkien's reading of the poem emphasizes beauty, dignity, and solemn reflection on mortality, then Gaiman and Avary's reading shows a skepticism towards heroic deeds, and especially the songs that poets sing about them.

The dramatic disagreement about the meaning of the poem extends to Greenfield's differentiation between 'epic tragedy' and 'tragic drama', where we can see that *Beowulf* (2007) falls into the category of 'drama' rather than 'epic' for several reasons, including its depiction of heroes as struggling against the workings of the universe rather than peacefully going along with a greater destiny. One of Greenfield's qualifications for tragic drama was the distance between the hero and his people. Importantly, the hero of a tragic drama is "in important ways isolated from them in his values and goals" (94) in a way that an epic hero is not. In the film, Beowulf's isolation from his people is palpable, especially in the second half when we see his unhappy kingship. His life is built on the lie that he killed Grendel's mother when in reality he fell victim to her seduction, and because of this lie he cannot comfortably call himself a great man. Despite his knowledge of this truth his people remain happily ignorant and honor him with reenactments of his glorious monster-killing days, a spectacle that he watches stone-faced, taking no pleasure in their adulation. It's clear that Beowulf feels isolated from virtually everyone around him, including his wife Wealthow (usually spelled Wealhþeow in Old English) and his closest friend

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Wiglaf, because they believe him to be someone he is not. Of course, the Beowulf from the poem has no such secret. He is exactly who his lords and men believe him to be, with nothing weighing on his conscience to mentally separate him from them. In this aspect, the poem leans towards epic while the film is more dramatic.

The film also treats the concept of fate differently from the poem. Greenfield says of tragic drama, "Human destinies may be involved, but not Destiny" (97). This means that epic tragedy is guided by a personified will of the universe, an inescapable power that humans cannot rise above. Fate in *Beowulf* is final and complete. Time and time again, Fate (*wyrd*, in the language of the poem, or God, who is similarly impersonal) grants Beowulf victory, until the end when it is time for him to die. In the film, Fate is gone, halfway replaced by Grendel's mother. Instead of playing out his life according to the will of Destiny, the Beowulf of the film makes at least two key choices. The first important choice is bargaining with Grendel's mother for power and glory. While the influence that Grendel's mother wields is strong, it is not absolute. However difficult it may be to avoid giving in to temptation, Beowulf still chooses not to fight her, allowing himself to be seduced and take the less risky road to power. From this point in the film, Grendel's mother is the highest power in the story. She has a mysterious, magical influence that guarantees Beowulf's rise to kingship, and then she presumably is responsible for his invincibility for the next fifty years. During a confrontation with a Frisian warrior, Beowulf rants that the gods will not allow him to die, stripping down and challenging the man to kill him with an axe the chest. There's rage in his voice, like he's seriously demanding that the Frisian warrior kill him. It's unclear whether Beowulf is referring to Grendel's mother as the guardian of his life, or whether it's because he is too famous of a hero to be killed by a mere soldier, but this scene does not indicate the presence of Fate as it is used in the poem. Grendel's mother may be very

powerful in the film, but Beowulf is still capable of choice, as seen in the next decision he makes: to battle the dragon and redeem himself as truly heroic. Here, when the dragon attacks, Beowulf deliberately refuses to allow any up-and-coming hero be responsible for defeating it, saying that if he passes off the responsibility it will "let the nightmare start all over again" (01:25:12). Wealthow confronts him, and he admits the truth, apologizing and asking that she "keep a memory of [him] not as a king or a hero, but as a man, fallible and flawed" (01:26:25). This is film Beowulf's moment of victory – at last, his conscience is clear and he is willing to die killing the monstrous son he fathered. In this moment, Beowulf asserts his freedom and fights back against Grendel's mother to rectify his mistake, claiming his status as a true hero and dying in righteous battle. He also claims his right to die. Whatever the cause of his invincibility, real or imaginary, it is gone, and he even refuses treatment for his wounds. It's perhaps even a happier ending than the poem, if you see the assertion of free choice as happy. Although an old man in the film, Wiglaf is a capable and mature warrior to take over the reins of leadership, and there is no indication of imminent destruction of the kind that ends the poem, just an assurance that Beowulf's song will continue to live on through the ages. There is, however, a hint that the threat of Grendel's mother lives on, as she will continue to seek out heroes to influence and father her monstrous children. Even so, Beowulf has proven that she is not all-powerful and that humans retain the power of free will if they can overcome their psychological vulnerabilities. Again, this reinforces the idea that *Beowulf* the film is dramatic rather than epic, but it might not even be a tragedy at all. Because Beowulf redeems himself at the end and overcomes the embodiment of Fate, Grendel's mother, his death is sad, but not tragic. The film ends with Beowulf having gained true hero status, a victory which is marred by his death but is ultimately a greater achievement than anything else he has accomplished yet in the narrative. Greenfield describes

the difference between a dramatic and epic hero, saying that "The hero of drama is circumscribed by the natural shortcomings of his rational will and critical intelligence in solving or resolving his dilemmas" (101). This framing of the dramatic genre rings true – Beowulf's greatest enemy is his own rational will and intelligence, which is not all-powerful, but can be broken and manipulated. The challenge, then, is to reclaim it from corruption, which he succeeds in at the cost of his own life.

Whether *Beowulf* (2007) is a good film or not, the narrative changes it makes to the story do not necessarily contribute to its failures. Giving Beowulf a moral struggle against his own weakness is an interesting choice that might make the audience more invested in him as a character than the Beowulf of the poem, even though doing so dramatically changes the thrust of the story. Out of the three possible categories of elegiac poem, epic tragedy, and tragic drama, the film comes closest to tragic drama, even though it undermines the tragic edge by morally redeeming Beowulf in the end. There is no great atmosphere of mourning or reflection in the film. There is a funeral where Beowulf's body and gold are set off in a burning ship, but the elegy Wiglaf gives is brief and it's over in less than two minutes of screen time. The ship funeral is likely a reference to Scyld's funeral from the beginning of the poem, a prologue missing from the narrative of the film that is just one of many of the secondary narratives that Gaiman and Avary shaved away from the poem. Overall, the film has more to say about legacy and the exaggeration that follows heroic deeds than mourning the inevitability of death. In the continuum of human to epic hero, the Beowulf of the film is decidedly more human and less hero; or at least, his heroism does not come naturally, from some innate Destiny. Through altering the genre from epic to dramatic, Gaiman and Avary incorporated a more modern storytelling sensibility into the poem and transformed its meaning.

Chapter 5: Meghan Purvis

An adaptation that takes a very different approach to the poem is Meghan Purvis' 2013 poetry collection *Beowulf*. She calls it a new translation, but it's somewhere between translation and adaptation. Unlike the 2007 film *Beowulf*, this is not a widely known adaptation of the poem. It has only 15 reviews on Amazon and does not appear until the ninth page of search results. However, Purvis's adaptation is successful in keeping the narrative intact while updating the language and formatting to a contemporary poetic style that is comprehensible and enjoyable to readers familiar with modern poetry. The primary changes Purvis makes are that the original *Beowulf* is one long, continuous poem, while she breaks the story into individual poems, each with their own title and modern language. Despite fragmenting the narrative, she preserves elements of the poem that the 2007 film adaptation disregarded, like the insert narratives, the presence of God and fate (she does not capitalize the word), and the somber tone. One element of the poem she alters is the narrator. While the narrator of the original poem maintains distance between himself and the story, Purvis's narrator has the freedom to get much closer and more personally involved. The narrator of the original poem sings about events and people that belong firmly in the past with a mythic, reverential tone, whereas Purvis uses multiple narrators, many of whom are speaking of their own experience as first-hand witnesses to the story. She often uses the collective pronoun 'we' as in "We carried our swords out onto a glinting, sharp-edged shore / (thanking God for our safe passage)" (26). In this poem, called *Baptisms*, the narrator is one of Beowulf's men as they arrive at the shore of the Scyldings. This narrative viewpoint is reminiscent of the elegiac Old English poem *The Wanderer*, where a man laments the loss of his lord and comrades. Like *The Wanderer*, Purvis's poems approach the subject matter from intimate, personal experience. In her introduction she evokes the sensory imagery of the poem,

saying, "I can tell you what I've seen: boats splitting water, an arm underneath an ashen shield, something stirring in the night. All of it is true. But what *Beowulf* will show you, will lean to whisper in your ear – is something belonging only to you" (preface). She conjures a sense of intimacy with the story, appealing to the way poetry functions as an expression of personal emotion and perspective from the poet. Her adaptation, as poetry, evokes Tolkien's feelings about the poem as a work of linguistic beauty and thoughtful reflection. Purvis's adaptation is guided by creative freedom and a desire to bring out the elements of the poem that compel her, including "the many voices within *Beowulf* that are often drowned out by a single narrator" (preface) that she wishes to give voice to. Her adaptation looks closely at the poem and demonstrates a holistic understanding of the material, and then uses that knowledge to selectively diverge from it in favor of subjective experience. The product is a modest poetry collection that has more in common with today's small-time, passionate poets who exist on the fringes of the literary world than a classic literary epic. Her *Beowulf* is not a replacement for more traditional translations, but rather a supplement that can be read, enjoyed, and appreciated regardless of whether the reader is already familiar with the story or not.

Conclusion

Ultimately, no adaptation is capable of replacing *Beowulf* as it was originally written and should not aspire to do so. The poem stands more or less alone as an Old English work of literature *sui generis*, shrouded in mystery and cliché among mass audiences but full of rich detail and craft for those who wish to investigate it. Reading the original poem, or an accurate and skillful translation, as most people cannot read Old English and will never have direct access to the text, is not an experience that can be replaced by a graphic novel or a film. The more barriers between the poem and the reader in the form of another author's interpretation, the less opportunity for a unique and personal encounter with a text that is so alien to our own culture. That's not to say that there's no place for adaptations among the sprawling legacy of the poem. Adaptations have potential to be vivid sites of personal, passionate, and thoughtful connection with the text, uniting rich engagement and care with ancient literature with contemporary literary mindsets. *Beowulf* does not have one singular correct interpretation, one ultimate answer key that explains everything about it, as the immense body of academic research surrounding it makes clear. Classifying the poem as one genre or another tends to be prescriptive rather than descriptive, as it varies according to the practical differences in how it is being used. For the sake of quick convenience, *Beowulf* is frequently called an epic heroic poem, even though examining the text from different perspectives can yield different titles. Adaptations have the freedom to manipulate the poem according to artistic creativity, and in doing so produce new interpretations of the text without the pressure to remain confined within an Early Middle Ages approach to storytelling. As genre has changed from the time of the poem's composition to now, it's fitting that new adaptations update the story for contemporary audiences, translating not just the text but

the narrative into new, expansive forms. Thanks to adaptation, *Beowulf* is as alive as it's ever

been for mass audiences.

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