Beowulf in Contemporary Culture

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Edited by

David Clark

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INTRODUCTION

DAVID CLARK

Beowulf and Medievalism: What and Who Matters?

This collection explores the extensive impact that *Beowulf* has had on contemporary culture across a wide range of forms. The last fifteen years have seen an intensification of scholarly interest in medievalism and reimaginings of the Middle Ages, as the essays below make clear. However, in spite of the growing prominence of medievalism both in academic discourse and popular culture—and in spite of the preeminent position that *Beowulf* itself holds in both areas—no study such as this has yet been undertaken. Indeed, along with early medieval literature more widely, the poem is mentioned only briefly in works such as the *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, or the recent collection *The Middle Ages in the Modern World*.[1] This collection therefore aims to make a significant contribution both to early medieval studies and to our understanding of *Beowulf*'s continuing cultural impact, and also to spur further research into this topic and medievalist responses to other aspects of early medieval culture.

Assembled here are contributions on topics ranging from film and television to video games, graphic novels, children's literature, translations, and versions, along with original responses (including a full storytelling performance script and the text and score of a ballad). The collection thus provides an overview of the positions *Beowulf* holds in the contemporary imagination, whilst also demonstrating the range of avenues yet to be explored, or even fully acknowledged, in the study of medievalism, and constituting an example of a possible 'mixed mode' methodological approach to the topic.

I will attempt no comprehensive overview of academic medievalism in this introduction. Even if that were desirable, it would scarcely be possible: Richard Utz and Aneta Dygon's annotated bibliography runs to over one hundred pages, and that only covers the field up to 2002. This work and Utz's introductory bibliography constitute an invaluable guide to the topic, along with the introductions to the works mentioned above.[2]

What I aim to do here instead is to present a personal (even polemical, since the personal is political) view of medievalism and the current context in which it is being studied, and from which this collection has emerged— for one of its contentions and motivations is that medieval*isms*, like medieval*ists*, refuse to accept traditional boundaries and embody multiple overlapping and interlocking categories. Indeed, like the chapters below, they demonstrate the productive power that such a refusal unlocks.

What is medievalism? Despite the recent outpouring of work on the subject outlined above, this is still not a straightforward question, nor does it have any easy answer. Indeed, it is a problematic term predicated on a troublesome concept.

Some definitions, then… Leslie Workman describes medievalism broadly as 'the study of the scholarship which has created the Middle Ages we know, ideals and models derived from the Middle Ages, and the relations between them'; Pauline Stafford sees it in terms of the 'use of and responses to the medieval past… and the scholarly study of these responses'; Clare Simmons discusses the differentiation of 'the later reception of the Middle Ages' from 'scholarly Medieval Studies'; Tom Shippey defines medievalism in temporal terms as 'any postmedieval attempt to re-imagine the Middle Ages… for the modern world [and] the study of the development and significance of such attempts.'[3]

These definitions demonstrate in miniature the complex range of materials and approaches encapsulated by medievalism—and the fraught relations between them. They are also all cited by Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl in their introduction to their book on *Medievalisms*, and are immediately followed by an account of Umberto Eco's 'Ten Little Middle Ages': 'Middle Ages as a pretext; as a site of ironical visitation; as a barbaric age; of Romanticism; of the *philosophia perennis* or of Neo-Thomism; of national identies; of Decadentism; of philological reconstruction; of so-called Tradition; and of the expectation of the Millennium.'[4] Medievalisms are, it is crucial to understand, not merely multiple… they also involve endless citation, quotation, and allusion: perennial re-framing and re-appropriation.

In a basic sense, then, medievalism sometimes refers to scholarship within the academy about the Middle Ages and the literature and culture of that period, a usage that constructs medievalism as a sort of secondary enterprise, parasitic on the primary ('medieval') sources it examines. It can also refer to reworkings of, or responses to, the Middle Ages and its literature and culture: such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, to select two classic examples. In this usage, there is

a sense that its practitioners are engaged in a more creative enterprise than academic researchers—producing texts that are in some sense 'original', despite (or perhaps because of the nature of) their relation to earlier medieval products (though some deem these, too, parasitic or lesser works). A third sense, however, involves cultural products which engage in reworkings of medievalist products in the second category, rather than medieval sources themselves, and this is sometimes dubbed 'neo-medievalism' to distinguish it from the first and second categories; it is treated as parasitic even more frequently than those categories, especially when it involves interventions deemed by (some) commenters to involve a degree of amateurism and/or anachronism. Finally, we might distinguish a fourth category of criticism and commentary on medievalist works from the second and third categories, and it is into this last category that this collection of essays might seem to belong.

But, as is often the way with attempts at categorization, as soon as these groupings are laid out, exceptions, overlaps, fissures become apparent. As Carolyn Dinshaw has made clear, amateur engagements with the medieval are not only worthy of scrutiny, they are in fact fundamental to the creation of medieval studies in the first place and cannot be neatly distinguished from professionalized medievalism.[5] Nor is it possible to cut off the creative works of medievalism (in the second sense) by authors like Tolkien and Lewis from their scholarly works of medievalism (in the first sense): those works are complementary and deeply interconnected as many scholars have shown.[6] Furthermore, as this collection exemplifies, it would be profoundly misguided to separate out contemporary academic comment on medievalist (or neo-medievalist) work of any kind from the kinds of creative engagement and production that are often deemed 'primary' or 'original'.

For it is not just that academics are sometimes also creative writers and storytellers and vice-versa (or professional translators, or amateur re-enactors, or any number of other possible occupations and identities). To point that out is merely to acknowledge that people are complex and can be or do more than one thing, whether simultaneously, consecutively, or intermittently. It is also important to recognize (as scholars are increasingly emphasizing) that there is no one 'original' Middle Ages or medieval period to which later responses can be compared, or which has priority of authority.[7] As the singular plural of 'the Middle Ages' signals, it/they have always been multiple rather than monolithic. Furthermore, the idea of the medieval period being 'in the middle' of something is both deeply problematic and highly productive. It is problematic because it is a concept created by Early Modern writers (a category that is as troublesome as that

of the Renaissance) to constitute themselves as the inheritors of a 'Classical' heritage in opposition to what came before (deeply engaged with that heritage in different ways and with different motivations though 'what came before' was).[8] It is productive because the state of being 'in the middle' can imply a sense of poise, of balance, of transition, of catalysis, of anxiety, of empathy.[9]

The foregoing might seem unnecessarily obfuscatory: the anxious or sophistical scab-picking of a discipline full of inveterate problematizers. But, although we are used to the point of fatigue to the idea that terms and categories are problematic, or provisional, or unstable (though necessary in practical terms), it is important not to let pragmatics get in the way of recognizing—bearing witness to—the real-world divisive consequences of allowing unsatisfactory and inaccurate categories to pass unacknowledged or unchallenged.[10] (As we shall see shortly, this has come to the fore particularly obviously in discussions over the last couple of years about racism and exclusionary language within the field.)

For at stake, fundamentally, are questions over what counts or matters in a given discipline—and who counts or matters. Too often, one category is used to devalue another: for instance, as Dinshaw has explored in *Getting Medieval*, the notions of the popular or the commercial are employed to dismiss the academic as out-of-touch or culpably wasteful (as in 'this is an academic (= irrelevant) discussion', or 'funding this academic study is a waste of tax-payers' money').[11] Alternatively, notions of academic 'seriousness' motivate disdain of the idea of paying attention to books or film that are popular: that is, enjoyed by a lot of people, or financially successful. In both cases, the academic and the popular/commercial are constructed as an 'either-or' binary, to their mutual detriment.

Medievalism (in sense 4, of the academic study of modern or contemporary medievalisms) is sometimes seen as having had its origin or legitimation in the rise of scholarly journals like *The Year's Work in Medievalism* and *Studies in Medievalism* in the 1980s. Those involved in these and other such publications have consistently called scholars to question the legitimacy of maintaining a hierarchy of medievalist works that deserve more attention and scrutiny, to scrutinize the shibboleth of 'fidelity' to medieval sources or historical 'facts' (and consider the ways in which they have been constructed), and to be alert to a large number of other assumptions. Nonetheless, nearly forty years later, academic snobbery exists within and around medievalist texts and products on multiple levels (and to a degree which is often underestimated by scholars of medievalism).

At the most fundamental level, medievalism itself is still regularly differentiated from 'traditional' medieval studies and found wanting; within medievalism, television is sometimes denigrated in relation to film, 'arthouse cinema' is often deemed more worthy of study than Hollywood, computer games are frequently devalued by association with adolescence which is in turn associated with a lack of sophistication, and children's literature is dismissed as trivial in comparison with so-called literary fiction, along with other 'genre' fiction like fantasy or science-fiction.

But it is not just a matter of the relative merits of objects of research. It is also about what kinds of medievalists matter.

I am writing this introduction as a white, middle-class academic with a (currently, relatively) secure position in a (fairly) traditional university, as are some of the other contributors. That does not mean we are immune to the vicissitudes of political, economic, and corporate trends—nor that we are not subject to discrimination and marginalization on a number of other grounds—but it does mean we are writing from a position of relative privilege, and it is increasingly problematic not to acknowledge the areas of privilege within which many of us operate, whether because of our ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, or on other grounds.

That is especially the case, currently, within medieval studies (broadly conceived). The appropriation of the term 'medieval' for reactionary political ends is not new: in a sense it goes back as far as the coining of the term, and it has regularly been employed by politicians against enemies they wish to construct as 'barbaric', 'primitive', or 'other': as, for instance, in the rhetoric of the Gulf Wars or of 9/11, or the appropriation of medieval icons and material by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and rightwing interest groups.[12] But in the last few years, medieval culture and particularly the culture of Anglo-Saxon England has become the subject of a territory war: both in the public sphere, as the alt-right has tried to claim *Beowulf* for white nationalist ideology, and within academia, as the exclusionist and exclusionary tactics of some Anglo-Saxonists have become apparent.[13] The questions of who counts as an Anglo-Saxonist/Early Medievalist/scholar of Anglo-Latin and Old English—that is, who matters—and who the Middle Ages (or *Beowulf*) belongs to, are becoming ever more pressing.

I am writing (along with several of the contributors) within the context of academia in the United Kingdom, in which Early Career Researchers inhabit an ever more precarious position; where zero-hours temporary contracts with limited rights and protections have become the predominant reality; and even tenure, when gained, is vulnerable to market-based departmental downsizing. This affects how and what such medievalist

academics can write: in literal terms, it is now more difficult to contemplate embarking on a full-length book or a research-intensive article, when writers are supporting themselves (and their dependents) on minimal incomes and no job security. But it also affects what material is published, for a number of reasons. For instance, established academics within the United Kingdom are sometimes discouraged by their institutions from editing special issues of journals or essay collections—historically a stimulating meeting-point for senior and early career academics—because of anxieties over possible prejudice against such publications on the part of some of those adjudicating the REF: the Research Excellence Framework which periodically determines how much public funding will be awarded to UK universities.[14] For their part, some publishers are reluctant to take on edited collections, viewing the immediate market for them as limited, and internal reviewers often show an explicit or implicit bias for contributions by 'known' academics with a track-record, who in turn may be more reluctant to contribute chapters to (and thus 'validate') these collections for the reasons outlined above. Again, when academics do decide to edit essay collections, they are often influenced by this uncertain situation in terms of whom they can invite to participate. Such collections often emerge out of large conferences and symposia, but prefaces and forewords frequently acknowledge how many participants had to be excluded from the final volume: a little digging makes it obvious how many of those who 'made it' have a track record.

To name names would be invidious, but it is important to recognize the deleterious consequences of such trends in the current academic environment. This volume contains contributions from brilliant medievalist writers and practitioners both in and outside the academy at various stages of their careers, many of whom have contributed despite (and whilst engaging with) very difficult personal and/or professional circumstances. Nonetheless, there are other contributions which were lost along the way. Lost when people were no longer able to sustain working in a hostile and increasingly toxic academic environment and left for more reliable sources of employment; lost when academics were overwhelmed by the number of their commitments within institutions where not being seen to juggle an unhealthy workload is to risk being made redundant; lost when the pressure to publish at a rate and in the way prescribed by their institution, meant researchers felt unable to take on a passion project, or simply a topic outside their immediate area of current focus.

This collection should not be seen as somehow representative of contemporary medievalism—that would hardly be possible in a field which is so diverse and ever more rapidly growing (as several of the

chapters make clear). For instance, though the contributors come from a number of social and professional backgrounds, the essays are predominantly written from within the UK context—though a minority of contributors are based in Europe and North America—and are not very ethnically diverse. Similarly, although the collection covers a wide range of topics—from the visual media to literature, translation to composition, ethnicity to sexuality—many more are untapped. There is much more, for instance, that could be said about the use of or responses to *Beowulf* in literature marketed to adults in various genres, or in pornography, art, computing, and music.[15] Nor should the individual chapters be taken as representative of the entirety of the fields with which they engage, though they do, of course, consider the context of the works on which they focus. These contributions might be better viewed as a *smörgåsbord*, intended to whet the reader's appetite to explore further the rich variety of medievalisms on offer. Though they are certainly unified by common themes and concerns, there is no singular voice or mode here, no keynote, except the note of curiosity—a passionate curiosity about why the Middle Ages (however defined) still matter to our contemporary culture, however they are adapted, appropriated, reworked, assimilated, and transformed.

At the time the contributions were finalized and edited (2018-19), there have already been important new interventions in the area, and others are regularly emerging. These will need to be reckoned with, and soon. Particularly important for future study will be the novel *The Mere Wife* and a forthcoming translation of *Beowulf* by Maria Dahvana Headley: Carolyne Larrington's interview with her here supplies ample proof if proof were needed that scholarship and creativity, popularity and integrity are not mutually exclusive. But there is much more to come. We cannot predict, limit, or shut-down the production of future medievalisms—and that is as it should be.

Overview of the Collection

The collection begins two chapters by Clark on filmic and televisual responses to *Beowulf*. The first explores contemporary anxieties around gender, sexuality, and reality in two film versions of *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* (1999) and *Beowulf* (2007) have been widely discussed by scholars, but Clark identifies a problematic presumption of heteronormativity and argues that the films register anxiety over the ownership of the gaze in cinema, offering both hyperfeminine and hypermasculine bodies as sources of both fear and desire. He thus opens up these films for re-examination from less restrictive hegemonic perspectives. The second

chapter, 'Race/Ethnicity and the Other in *Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands*', more briefly takes a television series that has been largely ignored by critics and argues that, though it might seem to depart from the poem, it in fact engages with some of its key thematic concerns, such as revenge and heroism, otherness and monstrosity, bloodline and dynastic conflict. In the light of this analysis, the chapter also explores the show's multiethnic casting choices and discusses the alt-right appropriation of *Beowulf* as part of a putative North Germanic 'white' heritage and the online policing of its adaptations. It argues one possible context for these important discussions might be that of ongoing research findings about non-white histories in premodern Britain; they may offer an(other) opportunity for early medievalists to engage with racist ideologies and structures both within and without the discipline.

Victoria Cooper and Andrew Elliott's chapter moves us into the relatively unexplored territory of video-game adaptations, investigating the dynamics of 'hack-and-slash' medievalism and demonstrating that the remediation of *Beowulf* is not a one-way linear process, but rather a complex, multi-faceted negotiation of key elements in the poem's cultural legacy. *Beowulf: The Game* is explored as an intertext, crafted from both the poem and the film *Beowulf* (2007): a participatory reworking.

The fourth chapter moves away from visual media towards textual responses to *Beowulf*. Janice Hawes analyses two versions of the poem aimed at children by James Rumsford and Nicky Raven, arguing that they each create links between their young audiences and the narrative's fantasy world, employing plot adaptation and techniques of characterization to convey clear messages about heroic ideals and masculinity as they negotiate the interrelation of past and present.

Hawes's chapter is followed by Claire Pascolini Campbell's close reading of the exciting experimental and influential translation of *Beowulf* by Thomas Meyer. She explores his 'visual text' in the context of broader developments in Concrete Poetry and argues that Meyer offers an innovative engagement with the poem's oral-traditional features and renders its spatial and temporal geographies visible.

As Pascolini Campbell observes, the proliferation of competing translations is generative, rather than (say) inhibiting, and the two following chapters by Alonso and Purvis bear this out clearly. Jorge Luis Bueno Alonso uses his dual experiences as scholar and translator to explore the various translatorial choices made in both English and Iberian versions of *Beowulf*, focusing on the key (and controversial) term *lofgeornost*. He evaluates these choices, and the parallel decisions made by graphic

novelists and artists, in developing his own translatorial philosophy: a manifesto for poetic translation.

Meghan Purvis's own poetic version of *Beowulf* appeared to critical acclaim in 2013. In her chapter, she reflects on the differing contexts of its composition and reception, and gives fascinating insights into the choices she made in producing her version (originally as part of her doctoral work) and how they relate to contemporary theories of translation and adaptation. She concludes with an assertion of the value inherent in multiplying meaning: of assembling an army of different *Beowulfs* for the present time to help us 'tell as many stories as we need to, raise up as many voices as it takes.'

Simon Thomson's chapter on 'Playful storytelling in *Beowulf*' also demonstrates the generative possibilities inherent in adapting the poem for new audiences: this time via the medium of oral storytelling performance. He draws on his dual expertise as both scholar and performer to reflect on the different ways in which *Beowulf* responds to oral techniques and helps audiences to make meaning. He supplements his chapter with a written version of the way he recounts the initial third of the poem (published here for the first time).

An original response to *Beowulf* and other Old English literary works also forms the focus of Mark Atherton's contribution, but this chapter brings in the medium of music. The music and text of Atherton's original ballad 'The Whale Road' is published here for the first time, and Atherton follows it with a reflection on the Old English intertexts of the song (including Exeter Book Riddle 60, *The Husband's Message*, and *The Seafarer*, as well as *Beowulf*), and his differing approaches to *Beowulf* as scholar and as performer.

Carolyne Larrington's interview with Maria Dahvana Headley about her 2018 response to *Beowulf*, *The Mere Wife*, and her soon-to-be published translation of the poem concludes the collection, bringing together the volume's intertwining strands of scholarly analysis and creative response, academic and practitioner, and of *Beowulfs* past, present, and future.

Notes

[1] Louise D'Arcens, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism.* Cambridge, 2016; *The Middle Ages in the Modern World: Twenty-first Century Perspectives*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Chris Jones. Proceedings of the British Academy, 208. Oxford, 2017. *Beowulf* receives more extended attention by Jones and others as part of the wider culture in David Clark and Nicholas Perkins, eds, *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination*. Cambridge, 2010: in that collection, see

particularly Chris Jones, 'From Heorot to Hollywood: *Beowulf* in its Third Millennium', pp. 13-29.

[2] Richard Utz and Aneta Dygon, 'Medievalism and Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Studies,' *English Faculty Publications* 6, available at https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/english_pubs/6; Richard Utz, 'Medievalism–An Introductory Bibliography,' and the other materials available at https://www.uni-due.de/perspicuitas/editorial.shtml. See also the important series: *Studies in Medievalism*, at https://boydellandbrewer.com/series/studies-in-medievalism.html; and *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, at
https://sites.google.com/site/theyearsworkinmedievalism/home.

[3] Leslie Workman, 'Editorial,' *Studies in Medievalism* 1.1 (1979), 1-3, at 1; Pauline Stafford, 'Introduction,' in *The Making of the Middle Ages: Liverpool Essays*, ed. Marios Costambys, Andrew Hamer, and Martin Heale. Liverpool, 2007, pp. 1-14, at p. 1; Clare Simmons, 'Introduction,' in *Medievalism and the Quest for the 'Real' Middle Ages*, ed Clare Simmons. London, 2002, pp. 1-28, at p. 1; Tom Shippey, 'Medievalisms and Why They Matter,' *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (2009), 45-54, at 45.

[4] Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, 'Medievalisms: *The Magic of the Middle Ages*,' in their *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. Abingdon, 2013, pp. 1-11, at p. 2, also citing Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver. New York, 1986, pp. 68-72.

[5] See Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. Durham, 2012, as well as her *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-modern*. Durham, 1999.

[6] See, for example, the essays in Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist*. London, 2002; Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. New York, 2003; Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*. Oxford, 2008; Mark Atherton, *There and Back Again: J. R. R.Tolkien and the Origins of The Hobbit*. London, 2012.

[7] See further, in relation to *Beowulf*, Jones, 'From Heorot to Hollywood.'

[8] cf. Pugh and Weisl, 'Medievalisms,' p. 1, and see further Alexander Murray, 'Should the Middle Ages Be Abolished?' *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2004),1-22, at 4.

[9] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's blog 'In the Middle' appositely displays as a kind of epigraph Deleuze and Guattari's claim that 'It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes.' http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com, quoting Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who negotiate principles of multiplicity, rhizomes and politics in their 'Introduction: Rhizome,' in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. New York, pp. 3-28, at p. 23.

[10] Thus, I disagree with David Marshall's implication that focussing on the proliferating categories of medievalism is pointless: see 'The Haze of Medievalisms,' *Studies in Medievalism* 20 (2011), 21-34, at 32.

[11] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, esp. her 'Coda'.

[12] See, for example, Pugh and Weisl, 'Political Medievalisms: The Darkness of the Middle Ages,' in *Medievalisms*, pp. 140-57; Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*. Chicago, 2007.

[13] I give an overview of the recent debates about 'Anglo-Saxon Studies' (and how Medievalists of Colour have called out exclusionary behaviours in the field) at the end of my chapter on responses to ethnic diversity in *Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands* below.

[14] There are many critiques and defences of the REF. For the former, see, for example, Derek Sayer's *Rank Hypocrisies: The Insult of the REF*. London, 2015. For the REF's account of itself, see http://www.ref.ac.uk. It is worth noting that non-transparency and non-accountability is, of course, built into the REF process, since feedback on individual researchers or publications is not given and thus is not subject to scrutiny or appeal.

[15] There is a fairly extensive body of musical versions of, and responses or allusions to *Beowulf* in a variety of genres (rock, musical theatre, contemporary classical music), which medievalist musicologists have largely declined to address so far (including some invited to contribute to this volume).

BEOWULF ON FILM:
GENDER, SEXUALITY, HYPERREALITY

DAVID CLARK

Introduction: the *Beowulf* boom

This article uses film reworkings of the Old English poem *Beowulf* as a case study through which to explore contemporary anxieties around gender, sexuality, and reality.[1] It argues that the film reworkings of *Beowulf* examined here, contrary to a prevailing heteronormative stance in criticism, offer both hyperfeminine and hypermasculine bodies as a source of fear or desire (and often both simultaneously), and register anxiety over the question of the ownership of the gaze in cinema. Furthermore, in their constructedness and their relation to postmodern narrative tropes, hypertrophic gendered bodies may constitute a response to a deeper set of contemporary anxieties about reality and our access to it.

It must be said that the last two decades have seen an explosion of scholarly articles and books focussing on films set in or reimagining aspects of the Middle Ages. Critics have responded to both popular commercial films and 'high art' productions from a panoply of perspectives, drawing on translation, adaptation, and genre theory; gender, queer, and teratological theory, as well as more traditional cinematic analysis.[2]

During the twentieth century, few academics ventured to discuss the Old English poem *Beowulf* in the context of film studies, a notable exception being Alain Renoir (son of the distinguished filmmaker Jean Renoir), who analyzed Grendel's tripartite approach to Heorot in terms of cinematographic technique.[3] Although the BBC's drama department made a low-budget film version of *Beowulf* in the 1970s,[4] mainstream films tended during this period to adopt basic plot elements or conceal their relation to the poem.[5] Such debts have been noted in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*; *Raw Meat* (aka *Death Line*); *Clash of the Titans*; *Predator*; and *Beware: Children at Play*.[6]

However, at the start of the twenty-first century, during the period of intense critical reflection on medievalist film, several film versions of *Beowulf* appeared, ranging from Robert Zemeckis's 3D Performance-Capture *Beowulf*, released in cinemas worldwide on a $150 millon budget, all the way down to *Beowulf: Prince of the Geats*, a volunteer project in aid of the American and Norwegian Cancer Societies. Between these two (financial) poles come Yuri Kulakov's animated film *Beowulf*; the Christopher Lambert vehicle, *Beowulf*, and *The 13th Warrior*, starring Antonio Banderas; *No Such Thing*, *Beowulf & Grendel*, the made-for-television movie *Grendel*, and *Outlander*.[7] There are also a number of more-or-less amateur films and episodes of television series based on *Beowulf*.[8]

In terms of the approaches to medievalist film listed above, most critical attention has been paid to the gender dynamics of the *Beowulf* films, seen predominantly in terms of the literal and symbolic functions of their female characters, particularly Grendel's Mother, but the way some of the films question or champion traditional modes of heroism has also regularly been placed within the context of the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.[9]

Recent criticism tends to dismiss as outdated or naïve the idea of examining (or valuing) the issue of a film's 'loyalty' to its ultimate source, and to gesture towards more sophisticated theories of translation and adaptation. Nonetheless the spectre of faithfulness still looms large for some medievalist critics.[10] For instance, Haydock and Risden's *Beowulf on Film* begins by dismissing the notion of source fidelity as outdated, but the subsequent chapters continually and anxiously reinscribe it in discussing the films, and the book culminates with an attempt to conjure a 'faithful' screenplay treatment.[11] A recent study of audience responses to medieval film also clearly shows that fidelity and authenticity are key concerns within a complex range of expectations (and prejudices) on the part of modern audiences.[12]

The following discussion draws on these previous critical works in its analysis of film reworkings of *Beowulf* in the very late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[13] However, rather than discussing them primarily within the contexts of global terrorism and colonialism, or faithfulness and anachronism,[14] it picks up the critical discussion of the gender dynamics of the *Beowulf* films and their interaction with questions of sexuality and the male and female gaze, seeking to move beyond the heteronormative tendencies widely seen in the secondary literature to date.[15] It ties the films' dynamics to contemporary anxieties about female empowerment and male objectification, and issues of reality and representation.

Beowulf (1999): the shieldmaiden and the succubus

Two of the most noticeable innovations of *Beowulf* (1999) are the introduction of a shieldmaiden character, Kyra (Rhona Mitra), who serves as a spiky love interest for Beowulf (Christopher Lambert), and the newfound ability of Grendel's Mother (Layla Roberts) to shapeshift between her monstrous form and that of a sex siren able to seduce men in their dreams. Two later *Beowulf* films follow this innovation in introducing a female sex interest for the titular hero: *Beowulf & Grendel* (2005) in the guise of Selma the witch (Sarah Polley); and *Beowulf* (2007) in the similarly shapeshifting form of Grendel's Mother (Angelina Jolie).

Other films, too, introduce prominent new female characters: the story of *No Such Thing* (2002) centres on the relationship between the reporter (Sarah Polley again) and the Grendel character (Robert John Burke); Ingrid (Alexis Kendra, credited as Alexis Peters) joins *Grendel* (2007) as the love interest of a new young male character, Finn (Chuck Hittinger); Freya (Sophia Myles) features as a Viking shieldmaiden in *Outlander* (2008). But why include these female characters at all? And why is the sex angle so prominent?

For E. L. Risden the answer is obvious: it is because sex sells; that is, it appeals to 'the salacious tastes of either contemporary filmmakers or audiences.'[16] Jodi-Anne George notes this factor but also sees the introduction of new female characters as 'an attempt to update an unquestionably male-dominated text for a modern audience raised with notions of gender equality' as well as a 'cynical… concession to demographics', aiming to appeal to female as well as male audiences.[17] Other critics consider the question on a more complex intertextual level, such as Nickolas Haydock, who sees Grendel's Mother's erotic incarnation as a version of the lamia or succubus, the latter a demonic being prevalent in medieval monastic discourses of nocturnal emission.[18] Haydock assesses *Beowulf* films as part of 'a larger discourse on gendered violence and the abject maternal' connected to the tropes and concerns of the horror film genre (138). Both Haydock and David Marshall see Angelina Jolie's golden but lethal Grendel's Mother as an embodiment of masculine desires for a toxic combination of sex, wealth, and power.[19]

The plot of *Beowulf* (2007) indeed revolves around Grendel's Mother as a scapegoat for the consequences of masculine desire and as an embodiment of the monstrous feminine in the forms of both 'the archaic mother' and the *femme castratrice* (or 'castrating woman'), to adopt Barbara Creed's influential categories.[20] However, these same elements are explored just as clearly in the earlier film *Beowulf* (1999), and it is this

film that I examine first. This enables us to postpone the questions of directorial or screen-writerly intent prominent in discussions of *Beowulf* (2007), since the films' similarities suggest a wider cultural preoccupation along the lines suggested by Haydock.[21] However, in *Beowulf* (1999) the character of Kyra both complicates this gender dynamic and also suggests a subtly different cultural imperative for both films.

Christopher Lambert's Beowulf is represented as an icon of hybridity and intertextuality from the film's outset. The extradiegetic music invokes Sergio Leone's iconic use of the Jew's Harp, indicating the Western trope of the lone hero with a troubled past. However, the fight sequence that quickly follows is underscored with electronic and techno music, and Lambert's action-hero star persona and martial acrobatics combine with the post-apocalyptic neomedieval setting and his costume of leather and futuristic weaponry to invoke science-fiction and fantasy genres, as well as the violent visual and aural aesthetic of the computer game and action film. At this time, Lambert was particularly known for the *Highlander* series, and he had to turn down the sequel of *Mortal Kombat* in order to film *Beowulf*, and so the latter film's generic mix is clearly supported by the actor's extratextual associations.[22] As Kathleen Forni points out, genre pastiche of this kind is associated with lowbrow or popular culture.[23] However, intertextuality and hybridity is also evident in the film's key female figures, Kyra and Grendel's Mother.

Rhona Mitra's Kyra is a character invented for the film. As Hrothgar's daughter she has status and rank, and as a shieldmaiden she exhibits strength, skill, and a degree of agency. She is initially antagonistic towards Beowulf, and we learn that she has killed her drunken, abusive husband, but the self-sufficiency and autonomy this suggests is removed by the end of the film, where she is both rescued by Beowulf and has fallen deeply in love with him. Her costume half-covers but simultaneously emphasizes her apparently augmented breasts as well as suggesting the fetishistic appeal of bondage gear, and Mitra was best known at the time as the live-action model for Lara Croft in the original video game *Tomb Raider*.[24] She thus ambivalently represents a form of female masculinity (in her ability to fight with weapons and oppose men) that both adds a transgressive erotic charge to, and is at the same time contained by, her sexualized femininity.

The actress who plays Grendel's Mother, Layla Roberts, was known previously as the Playboy Playmate of the Month for October 1997, and her offscreen associations are used in two scenes where she haunts Hrothgar's dreams in a diaphanous negligee. Her lust for killing and human blood is explicitly eroticized in both dialogue and gesture, but when Beowulf rejects her she morphs into a terrifying monster with

arachnoid, scorpion-like, and serpentine traits reminiscent of the Mother from the *Alien* film franchise.[25]

Haydock analyses the body-horror here in gendered terms, drawing attention to the 'protruding, snake-like phalloi emerging from her arms, legs, abdomen, and pelvis' and the way her 'beastly talons' evoke the myth of the 'vagina dentata' (131). Like Medusa, he sees Grendel's Mother as an 'apotropaic monster' who threatens masculinity in ways common in the horror film (138). Certainly, we can see in these opposed images an oscillation between heterosexual male sexual fantasy—the alluring *femme fatale*—and object of fear—the appropriator of the phallus, the engulfing monstrous feminine. However, what Haydock and other critics do not comment on is the way that Beowulf's rejection of Grendel's Mother in both her guises has to be balanced by his uneasy acceptance of Kyra.

Lambert's laconic delivery and butch demeanour is complemented by the mystification of his character. In an awkward dinner-party scene early in the film, Kyra pursues an antagonistic conversation with Beowulf in which she probes his background. When he tells her that he has never wanted a family, she comments 'I thought it only natural to desire home, family', and the ensuing interchange is revealing.

> Beowulf: Then I have no natural desires.
> Kyra: Interesting. How so?
> Beowulf: Since I have no desire to stay in one place, a home would be useless. And I have no desire for a family, since I don't want to create more like me.
> Kyra: So that your ego can rest assured of your uniqueness?
> [Beat]
> Beowulf: Exactly.

Beowulf's implied narcissistic singularity here plays interestingly on the Old English poem's emphasis on the hero's uniqueness.[26] However, in the use of the phrase 'natural desires' and rejection of reproduction ('family') the film-makers flirt with the possibility that Beowulf may be gay or queer, conceived in heteronormalizing terms as desire that is unnatural and set against 'family values'.[27]

These hints are made only to be quashed later during a sex scene with Kyra, and the ambiguity surrounding Beowulf's nature and motivation is eventually clarified when he confirms that he can sense and feel the Beast's presence. We learn that he is 'trapped between two worlds', 'damned', and drawn to evil and darkness because of his paternal descent

from 'Baal—god of darkness, lord of lies'. He must therefore battle endlessly against evil in order to resist this aspect of his nature.

Beowulf features here as psychologically complex and conflicted: a demonic or monstrous figure as much as a heroic one. This duality or ambivalence, even hybridity, is also explored in the versions of Beowulf in *Beowulf & Grendel* and *Beowulf* (2007), as we shall see. Nonetheless, on a cultural level, these early hints at a non-heteronormative nature are important and form part of the film's sexual and gender dynamic. Beowulf here is imagined as a cultural outsider: like the Hollywood cowboy, an icon of alienated and lone masculinity. However, the possibility that this status stems from queer desire is anxiously raised in order to be rejected as a misreading. Beowulf's rejection of Grendel's Mother's sexual advances and the aspects of the monstrous feminine that she embodies must be counterbalanced by his sexual and later romantic acceptance of Kyra, and her potentially threatening female masculinity is contained by the destruction of her former interpersonal ties and her dependence on and attachment to Beowulf.

Thus *Beowulf* (1999) is not just about masculine fears of the feminine, in Haydock's terms: it negotiates heterosexist male anxieties about both masculinity and femininity. *Contra* Risden, the film's sexual and gender dynamic is not just titillating: it explores the construction of self-questioning masculinity in opposition to a femininity that is both threatening (when uncontained) but necessary (if controlled).

When Grendel's Mother tries to tempt Beowulf, she confronts him about his lust for Kyra in these terms:

> How will her blood taste? You've wondered—you can't help it. You look at her, your blood pumps. Your mouth becomes wet. You haven't confused that hunger for something else, I hope?

The fusion and confusion of sexual and cannibalistic imagery is the starkest hint that Beowulf's desires may be perverse. Although he rejects them out of hand and destroys both Grendel's Mother and the monstrous feminine in a fiery blaze, the question of Beowulf's inner darkness is never finally settled. The film ends with the standard romantic trope of Beowulf and Kyra riding off into the sunset, but this heteronormative closure does not entirely shut down the anxiety the film registers about heroic masculinity's subversive potential, given that they leave behind them a burning settlement full of corpses.[28]

It is in this context that critical assumptions about the intended audience of this and other *Beowulf* films become revealing. As well as a general invocation of 'lowbrow' interests in 'sexy women and familial

dramas' (247), Forni states that *Beowulf* (1999) is 'obviously targeted at young males', assuming they would be 'titillated by the softcore sex sequences' and drawn to 'the video-game-inspired staged action sequences' and Lambert's 'moody, inarticulate, and noncommittal' but fashionable character (246). Here Forni both universalizes 'young males' within the stereotype of the 'nerd' (presumptively heterosexual, but reliant on pornography for sexual release), and by doing so also dismisses videogames and action films via their association with such teenage nerds.[29] Similar critical manoeuvres and assumptions are in fact commonplace in *Beowulf* films criticism.

Risden, for instance, implies that contemporary patterns of reading and filmmaking have 'sadly' become solipsistic, masturbatory experiences,[30] and produces an entirely heterosexist reading of *Beowulf* (2007), assuming 'a male audience, captivated by a nude, golden Angelina Jolie', which he also characterizes as a presumptive 'audience of teenage boys' (78). He later speaks of 'adolescent sexuality' but also of 'why *we* desire what we do' (119, my emphasis). Bill Schipper, too, both universalizes maleness— 'Nothing terrifies a male audience more than a physically and sexually powerful woman'—and trivializes misogyny, saying that Jolie's Grendel's Mother 'looks and sounds more like a Las Vegas show-girl than a terrifying monster'.[31] Finally, for Mary Bowman, the film suggests 'that no man will ever make the right choice when confronted with Angelina Jolie's digitally enhanced body'.[32]

In and of themselves, such heteronormative critical assumptions are not especially surprising. However, they do tend to shut down some of the multiple interpretative and identificatory positions offered by the films.

For instance, in her work on female heroes in popular cinema, Rikke Schubart identifies a number of archetypal roles for women in action films: dominatrix, rape-avenger, mother, daughter, and Amazon.[33] Grendel's Mother in both *Beowulf* (1999) and *Beowulf* (2007) could certainly be fitted into the rape-avenger archetype in a metaphorical sense, since, although in both cases she is avenging her son's death, this is tied to Hrothgar's colonialist strategies in taking the land that belongs to her and, by extension, to her son. In *Beowulf* (1999), it is explicitly put in these terms when Grendel's Mother explains: 'Long before the outpost was built, this was my land and my home. My son has the older claim—he has come for what is his right.' However, these films do not just provide a twist on the rape-revenge genre exemplified in *I Spit on Your Grave* (dir. Zarchi, 1978) or *Baise-Moi* (dir. Despentes and Trinh Thi, 2000): in both films, the dominatrix archetype also has explanatory power.[34]

Thaïs E. Morgan describes how, through her 'self-conscious role playing', the dominatrix transgresses the boundaries of sexual difference:

> In sum, with her phallic whip, her phallic high heels, her phallic hair, her phallic tongue, and her phallic clitoris, the dominatrix icon produces a monstrous hyperbole of phallocentricism, whose effect is to dislocate and destroy rather than to relocate and affirm the hypercode of sexual difference.[35]

Schubart notes that Angelina Jolie's action role in *Mr and Mrs Smith* (2005) involved her wearing a dominatrix costume.[36] She goes one step further in *Beowulf* (2007), where her humanoid form possesses both in-built high heels (which are part of her flesh) and a sinuous, whiplike tail. As Haydock notes, the phallic appendages in *Beowulf* (1999) attach to Grendel's Mother's monstrous form. Both characters can thus be read as appropriators of the phallus, the emblem of heterosexual male desire and power, and so, given their coding as monstrous, as misogynistic patriarchal creations.

Nonetheless, more reparative readings are available, for, as Schubart points out, both the dominatrix and the Amazon 'are at a masquerade ball. Their costumes explicitly play with gender and sexual behavior' (227). The use of the term 'masquerade' invokes theories of gender performance associated with Joan Rivière and Judith Butler: the idea that gendered traits and behaviours are not innate, but constitute the imitation of a model that has no originary status.[37] Pamela Robertson's work takes this further in arguing that icons of hypertrophic femininity can function as a form of 'feminist camp' subversive of sexual difference and gender binaries.[38]

Both Layla Roberts and Angelina Jolie in their humanoid incarnations are clearly models of hypertrophic femininity in their sexualized representation which fetishizes hair, lips, voice, skin, breasts, and, in Jolie's case, high heels. Robertson's work opens up the possibility that, for some audiences, such exaggerated femininity may in fact draw attention to the illusory or performative nature of gender, emphasized still more by the fantasy element of Jolie's digitally altered body.[39]

Ambiguity and ambivalence about the construction and subversion of gender and sexual roles are clearly an important part of the context within which *Beowulf* versions are being created and received. Critics, however, have tended to privilege a heteronormative worldview, and this is not just the case with regard to the representation of sexualized female characters. In fact, it is even more striking when it comes to the interpretation of the male hero himself.

Beowulf (2007): the case of the elusive phallus

During the fight scene with Grendel in Robert Zemeckis's 2007 film, Beowulf—represented as a blond Teutonic hero with an impressive eight-pack and exquisitely chiselled musculature—is insistently naked. Yet as he leaps lithely around the hall and grapples with Grendel, leaps from rafter to rafter and literally gets to swing from the chandelier, the audience never glimpses anything that would threaten the film's PG-13 rating. It is a scene that has been largely passed over by critics. Those who do address it express either bemusement or dismay at the hide-the-carrot comedy of the interaction.

The distinguished film critic Roger Ebert notes in his review the 'Austinpowerism' of the fight, but focusses more on Angelina Jolie's virtual nudity.[40] Jodi-Anne George, in her overview of *Beowulf*'s appearances in popular media, calls the decision to have Winstone fight nude 'inexplicabl[e]', and this particular sequence 'puerile'.[41] Nickolas Haydock similarly dismisses the humour here as 'puerility'.[42] More reflectively, William Brown places it within the context of 'the film's obviously humorous *double entendres*, overt sexual imagery, and its general over-the-top status, especially the moments of nudity'.[43] Brown goes on to argue that the film is humorous in a Bergsonian sense: that is, humans rendered automata (here by the Performance Capture process) become uncanny and therefore 'provoke laughter'. However, although the film's digitized characters certainly provoked unease and accusations of flatness and blandness from some viewers,[44] Brown's argument ignores the possibility that this nudity-related humour might be managing a different kind of unease or anxiety.

A move in this direction is made by David Greven, who briefly considers *Beowulf* (2007) in the course of a wider argument about Hollywood constructions of masculinity and queer representation.[45] For him, Beowulf is 'a buff gym specimen. This isn't a shaggy, rough-hewn medieval body but, instead, a delicately sculpted, gleaming example of postgay musculature: proportionate, nearly hairless save some decorative chest hair tendrils, feminized.' (6) Greven comments on the fight sequence that 'the spectacle [is] about what we *don't* see, Beowulf's presumably prodigious but invisible medieval manhood', and, in his view, the film 'explicates the paradoxical nature of the phallus as sign of both male power and of castration' (ibid.). However, his main interest is in the end of the film and the contrasted dying bodies of the dragon and his father: 'the aged, ruined Beowulf beside a golden, sleek version of his former

exquisite self', embodying 'the dream of American manhood as D. H. Lawrence described it, to "go backwards, from old age to golden youth".'

If we turn our attention back to Beowulf's invisible manhood, however, and explore the implications of the theoretical distinction between the penis and the phallus, then we may see Beowulf as a contemporary model of what white heterosexual men must want to be, but must never want to have; Grendel as his abject mirror, and Grendel's Mother as simultaneously the scapegoat for the results of male violence, the source of pleasurable horror in her embodiment of the monstrous-feminine, and the site of transference necessary to regulate and contain male desire, and to disavow the film's queer potential.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in cinema has long been central to discussions of gender in film, and the question of what is happening when audiences watch bodies on screen: who is looking, who is being looked at, and what identificatory positions are imaginable.[46] More recently, however, critics have questioned the ways her theory seems to imply a universalized dynamic of a male powerful subject and a female passive object. Peter Lehman, for instance, draws attention both to examples of men 'functioning as the erotic object of the female gaze' and to the way that straight male critics' articulation of male representation can be marked by 'repression and homophobia'.[47] Kenneth MacKinnon also engages with Mulvey's problematic assumptions in an extended exploration of male eroticism and the various ways in which it is ignored, disavowed, or deflected by audiences and critics.[48] One key strategy in the film epic is to associate spectacular male bodies with heroic action, whether aggressive and warlike or athletic, in order to explain their appeal as 'inspirational' and legitimise the viewer's extended contemplation of them (184).[49]

In this light, one could point to the combined athleticism and aggression of the fight scene in *Beowulf* (2007), where the naked Beowulf leaps around the hall in his ferocious attempts to hurt or kill Grendel. Where such discussions become particularly relevant to *Beowulf* (2007), however, is in the important visual and theoretical distinction they make between the penis (the male organ) and the phallus (the symbolic concept of patriarchal masculinity the penis imperfectly represents).[50] For there are at least two reasons that Beowulf's penis cannot be shown during the fight scene (other than the desire to maintain a PG-13 rating): on the one hand, Beowulf cannot be given a small or flaccid penis, because this would render him comic, emasculated, unheroic. However, the depiction of a penis appropriate to Beowulf's hypermasculine physique—that is big, hard, and beautiful—would make explicit the erotic spectacularization of