

BEOWULF AND THE COMIC BOOK: CONTEMPORARY READINGS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the appropriation of the Old English poem *Beowulf* by such a distinctive 20th-century art-form as the comic book. Since 1941 to present day, the text has been revisited by several authors at different stages of the development of the comic as an independent genre in a process parallel to its legitimation as a central part of the English literary canon. In the context of the modern commodification of the Middle Ages, the *Beowulfs* in comic book become a territory of negotiation between high and low culture as they revisit early Germanic epic to render it suitable for the taste of wider, contemporary audiences.

KEY WORDS: *Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxon literature, popular culture, comic book.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora la apropiación del poema anglosajón *Beowulf* por parte de una manifestación artística tan distintiva del siglo XX como es el cómic. Desde 1941 hasta hoy día, el texto ha sido revisado por diferentes autores a lo largo de las distintas fases del desarrollo del cómic como medio independiente de forma paralela a su legitimación como pieza fundamental de canon literario inglés. En el contexto de la actual construcción de la Edad Media como objeto de consumo, los *Beowulfs* del cómic se convierten en terreno de negociación entre la cultura oficial y la popular en tanto que revisan la épica germánica altomedieval para adaptarla al gusto del gran público contemporáneo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Beowulf*, literatura anglosajona, cultura popular, cómic.

As Pierre Bourdieu indicates, the difference between high and low culture products depends on the cultural capital and competence determining their consumption, which derives in the enclassement of both the work of art and its consumer (16). In this sense *Beowulf*, as a medieval text, is clearly a high culture item requiring a considerable level of learning to read it —linguistic competence in Old English and some familiarity with ancient Germanic poetry, to begin with. Although this is not the common cultural background of most contemporary readers, *Beowulf* has attracted wide audiences beyond the academic circles among those

who can just identify the title as one of the classic texts of the English canon. In this line, media and genres as diverse as film, television, the musical, the rock opera or science-fiction and adventure novels have revisited this text more than one millennium old and turned it into one more medieval product catering for popular audiences. This paper explores the appropriation of the Old English poem by modern popular culture in such a distinctive 20th-century art-form as the comic book, which proves that a heroic, legendary story already old for the Anglo-Saxons — it was set *in geardagum*, “the ancient days” — still elicits the interest of the audience in the modern world.¹

As a derivation of the illustrated story that had become popular in the 19th century, the comic book rises as one of the favourite forms of entertainment for young readers when, in the 1940s, the daily comic strips included in journals and magazines started to be published independently and serialized by distinctive, specializing companies.² *Beowulf* has in fact been present in the history of media from an early stage, yet before being turned into comic book matter it had already been the object of numerous revisitings both within the scope of high and low culture since the poem was recovered and first edited in 1815.³ In fact, as soon as the Old English text was accessible for the average reader through modern translations many abridged, simplified versions appeared, which paved the road to later parodies, adaptations and imaginative rewritings.⁴ This process of “vulgarization” of *Beowulf* has, however, run parallel to its legitimation as one of the central pieces of the English literary heritage and corner-stone of Old English Studies; actually, the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship is intimately connected to what in Foucaultian terms can be termed as the “archaeology” of this poem.⁵ Nowadays, beyond those

¹ This paper is part of a wider project studying the modern appropriations of *Beowulf* by multiple contemporary popular media and genres, which was the core of my doctoral dissertation “Los otros *Beowulfs*: reelaboraciones contemporáneas,” Universidad de Sevilla, 2003.

² As Robert C. Harvey remarks, “By the end of World War II, the comic book was an established literary form” (16). See Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* (London: William Heineman, 2005).

³ The first reference to *Beowulf* appears in 1705 in a letter sent by Humphrey Wanley to his employer, the antiquarian George Hickes, and the poem was later included in the catalogue of Old English manuscripts he compiled in the same year. It is not until 1803 when Sharon Turner, an amateur Anglo-Saxonist, acknowledged the relevance of *Beowulf* in the history of English culture and promoted its research. The *editio princeps*, however, was published in 1815 by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, and Icelandic scholar working for the Danish government who considered that *Beowulf* was written in a Danish dialect. On this topic, see *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Tom A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder (London: Routledge, 1998) and Kevin Kiernan, “The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded *Beowulf*,” *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. Peter Baker (New York: Garland, 2000) 195-218.

⁴ See Marijane Osborn.

⁵ See Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random, 1971). For the study of the “archaeology of the discipline” in the field of Old English Studies, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990).



English-speakers who might find the updating of the literary classic they studied in school amusing, the *Beowulfs* of the popular genres are more far-reaching in terms of audience than what the early British and American scholars envisioned when they recommended reading the poem to be inspired by the national and political virtues of the Anglo-Saxons.⁶ The neo-*Beowulfs* of film and comic, to speak of media addressing international markets, obviate the connection with any kind of clearly defined historical heritage—a relevant element in the articulation of the original text—while emphasizing the aspects of the adventure narrative just to create a product appealing to the tastes of a global audience.

The appropriation of the poem by popular genres actually shares in the wider cultural phenomenon of the popularization of the Middle Ages, a trend whose roots lie in Romantic sensibility and that is still operative nowadays. Drawing on 19th-century medievalism, modern productions as diverse as the theme park, the role-game or epic fantasy, among others, have implemented an imaginative interpretation and glamourization of the early Celtic and Germanic traditions that has set the pattern for subsequent readings of the medieval past as the enchanted landscape of adventure, heroism and magic.⁷ While ignoring historical evidence, original texts and academic research—that is, the core of medieval scholarship—modern audiences are attracted by the picturesque and fantastic aspects of the period. As a consequence, it becomes a *locus* for new narratives that depend mainly on a tradition articulated by the popular genres themselves. From Victorian Arthurianism to the Hollywood technicolor classics or the postmodern medieval tourist resort, the (re)invention and forgery of the Middle Ages have turned it into a marketable good, a phenomenon that, in Watson's words, "leads to pastiche as it becomes one more in a series of niches responding to lifestyle/lifestage market segments each one defined through market research and serviced throughout carefully targeted marketing" (254).⁸ The *Beowulfs* of comic book are inscribed in the frame of this popular medievalism.

The Old English poem actually provides authors with elements susceptible of being rewritten as a superhero story, which is the basis for the media. For a start,

⁶ See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981); Stanley R. Hauer, "Thomas Jefferson and the Anglo-Saxon Language," *PMLA* 98 (1983): 879-87; and María José Mora and María José Gómez Calderón, "The Study of Old English in America: National Uses of the Saxon Past (1776-1850)," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 97.3 (1998): 322-36.

⁷ See Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Pan, 1987), and Christopher Frayling, *Strange Landscape: A Journey through the Middle Ages* (London: BBC, 1995).

⁸ The commodification of the Middle Ages englobes phenomena as different as "medieval" films, rolegames, medieval markets and fairs, and holiday resorts/theme parks—from the ones located at medieval sites as The Exeter Medieval Jousting Tournament (Exeter) in England, to the less historical ones as the Camelot Theme Park (Lancashire) or American products as Hotel Excalibur (Las Vegas), The High Elven Kingdom Theme Park and Resort (Elven Glen, Virginia), and the medieval attractions of Disneyland Park (Los Angeles).





there is a plot grounded on the eternal conflict between good and evil, with a muscular warrior protagonist opposing a series of monstrous, wicked antagonists with many possibilities in their artistic design. The setting is rendered as the alluring Scandinavia of the Dark Ages where the characters find strange lands, magnificent halls, gloomy submarine monsters' caves, and even a dragon's lair, elements which connect the narrative to the "sword and sorcery" genre much to the taste of the young reader. As these assets of the poem seem to be universally appealing, the new *Beowulfs* address the imagination of readers worldwide and across generations.

In order to present a comprehensive history of Beowulfian comic, the following works have been chosen as representative of the different treatments the topic has received throughout time: Enrico Basari's Italian *Beowulf: Leggenda cristiana della antica Danimarca*;⁹ Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte's *Beowulf, Dragon-Slayer*; Jerry Bingham's *Beowulf*; Gareth Hinds' *Beowulf*; Francis Lombardi and Kevin Altieri's *A Different Shade of Grey*; and Brian Augustyn's *Beowulf*—late continued by Attila Adorjany.¹⁰ All these works characteristically take the exploits of Beowulf as their central plot, but there are many other comic artists who have included a *Beowulf* episode in the course of their own heroes' adventures.¹¹ Also, in other cases the comic artists just use the evocative names of some of the characters of the poem for their characters.¹² Quite frequently, the only connection with the Anglo-Saxon poem is the intervention of evil figures vaguely related to Grendel and his mother, or the appearance of dragons in the story.¹³

As a rule, the *Beowulf* of comic books share in the aesthetics of the legendary Germania as constructed by the genres of popular culture, and most often they reproduce the topics and clichés operative in junk fiction to put them to the service of a superhero inserted in this early medieval pseudo-historical background.

⁹ Further references in this paper to Basari's work follow its Brazilian version as *O Monstro do Caím*.

¹⁰ As comic is a highly collaborative form of art, in each case I just list the names of the writer and main graphic artist.

¹¹ This can be observed, for example, in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Thor* 337, and lately in Bill Holliher and Holly Gollightly's new episodes of *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* ("Just Dreamy"). In some other cases, a modern superhero assumes the name of the Geat prince—as in *Coventry* by Bill Willingham, who has also written two modern short novels on a new hero named Beowulf, *Monster Maker* and *Hyde & Seek*.

¹² Thus, Beowulf is an alias for superheroes as Ulysses Bloodstone, a monster-hunter created by John Warner and Len Wein for Marvel Comics series *Strange Tales* and *Marvel Presents*, and Grendel and his mother lend their names to evil figures in narratives as Matt Wagner's series *Grendel* and in the successful *Captain Marvel v*, among others. The name of Beowulf also appears in comics not dealing with superheroes, as for instance in Richard Moore's erotic detective story *Deja Vu*, which presents Kathrina the Witch's adventures; here Beowulf is the name of one the protagonist's lovers.

¹³ As for instance in Brian Augustyn and Humberto Ramos' *Crimson* 22 ("Blood and Tears"). Likewise, there is a comic for young children entitled *Kid Beowulf* by Alexis E. Fajardo, where Beowulf and Grendel are mischievous twelve-year-old twin brothers and superheroes.

The origins of the characterization of these neo-Beowulfs as graphic heroes can in turn be traced back to 19th century historical romance, particularly to novels dealing with the archetype of the Viking as Noble Barbarian.¹⁴ Works as Walter Scott's *The Pirate*, and later novels as G.W. Dasent's *Vikings of the Baltic*, G.A. Henty's *The Dragon and the Raven*, and H. Rider Haggard's *Eric Brighteyes*, among others, shaped the image of the brave Norseman for the following generations. In general, this kind of literature has tended to oversimplify the Scandinavian past and, influenced by biased reading of the sagas and the historical chronicles, has presented it as a crude age of violence and heroism.¹⁵ This is indeed the narrative tradition framing one of the most famous Scandinavian comic book characters, *Prince Valiant*; created in 1937 by Harold Foster, this series presents the adventures of an exiled Viking prince from the imaginary kingdom of Scandia at King Arthur's court.¹⁶

In following this archetype, the Beowulfs of comic accomplish their quest as true muscular heroes and defend the community in danger by means of their physical strength, since their courage and loyalty, typical virtues of the Viking champion, are tested in a never-ending sequence of battles. The heroic ethos of the Old English poem is, however, simplified and the sophisticated social economy shaping the behaviour of the characters in the medieval text is displaced in order to create an adventure story suitable for the modern consumer's taste. We cannot forget that, after all, the reader of comics is fundamentally a male teenager with just a limited interest in literature or medieval history and culture.¹⁷

The first *Beowulf* in comic format is Enrico Basari's; published in 1941 by the Italian magazine *Il Vittorioso*, this work reflects the formal features common in early comic books, which followed the model established by the American leading publishers King Features and DC Comics; as Harvey indicates, the artistic design of early comics is relatively simple, resorting to a traditional strip sequence division, ordered text captions, and usually penned in just black and white ink (13-15).¹⁸ Basari's work approaches the spiritual conflict between good and evil as represented

¹⁴ See F.E. Farley, *Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic Movement* (Boston: Ginn, 1903); Margaret Omberg, *Scandinavian Themes in English Poets, 1760-1800* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiks, 1976); Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971); and R.I. Farrell, *The Vikings* (London: Phillimore, 1982).

¹⁵ See Krístan Eldjárn, "The Viking Myth," *The Vikings*, ed. R.I. Farrell (London: Phillimore, 1982) 262-73.

¹⁶ There is a film version, *Prince Valiant*. Henry Hathaway. 1954, starring Robert Wagner and Janet Leigh.

¹⁷ Popular culture also offers a comic side of the Viking world represented by such an irreverent film as Terry Jones' *Erik the Viking* (1989) and a comic strip as *Hagard the Horrible*, created by Dik Browne in 1973.

¹⁸ The artistic concept of the comics of the 1940s is not very different from that of the original comic strips of journals and magazines; their images are contained in the framed panels, speeches and the depicting of the action are timed, and there are large narrative captions as the visual is still secondary to the textual. On this topic, see Harvey (1-15).





by the Christian and the pagan in what Osborn defines as a “highly Catholicized” version of the Old English poem (351). His presentation of this conflict —a central preoccupation of Beowulfian scholarship in the 19th and early 20th centuries¹⁹— becomes particularly relevant in the immediate historical context of this comic, that of the destruction of the European moral values by World War II.

Interestingly, Basari transforms Beowulf into a Christian prince fighting the evil power of Satan in the figure of Grendel, ally of the heathen king, Rogar (Hrothgar). The title of the Brazilian version of the comic, *O monstro do Caím*, is much revealing, as in this story Rogar has murdered his own brother, Beowulf’s father, to seize the throne of Denmark.²⁰ The parallel with contemporary Italian history —the fascist connections with Germany and the development of the war with the occupation of the nation by the German army— could not pass undetected to the readers, who were also aware of *Il Vittorioso* being a nationalist publication often distributed through Catholic parishes.²¹ At the end of the story, Beowulf’s reward for having overcome Grendel’s dark magic and defeated the powers of Hell is to have his soul carried to heaven by two archangels. Beowulf’s last words are in fact a declaration of his Christian faith: “A minha alma se engrandece atendendo ao chamado dos seus santos. Erguei os estandartes somente para obras de paz e de amor. Desprezai as honrarias do mundo e o ouro das traições, as intrigas e as valanias. Louvai ao senhor. Assim seja.”²² Although the distortion of the original plot may seem somehow amusing for later audiences, Basari is absolutely serious about the moral message of his work (Fig. 1).

The following *Beowulfs* in comic format do not appear until the last quarter of the century, but they are coincidental with Basari’s Viking archetype, the one prevalent in popular fiction. In this line, later best-sellers novels by specialists in Viking fiction as Henry Treece —*Viking’s Dawn* (1956), *The Road to Miklagard* (1957), *Viking’s Sunset* (1958)— Poul Anderson —*Rolf Kraki’s Saga* (1973) and *The Wars of the Gods* (1997)— and Harry Harrison and John Holm —*The Hammer and the Cross* (1988) and *One King’s Way* (1995)— popularized this positive image of the heroic Norseman. Film is also a recognizable influence in the implementa-

¹⁹ The discussion of the blending of pagan and Christian elements in *Beowulf* was one of the main concerns of early Anglo-Saxon scholarship; on this debate see the Introduction to Shippey and Haarder’s *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1998) and F.A. Blackburn, “The Christian Coloring in the Beowulf,” *PMLA* 12 (1897): 205-25; and Larry D. Benson, “The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*,” *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. R.P. Creed (Providence: Brown UP 1967) 193-213.

²⁰ Most readers, no matter their cultural background in English literature, probably recognize here the connection with *Hamlet* by means of this case of fratricide in the royal Danish family.

²¹ See on-line the *Catalogo dil Fumetto Italiano* <<http://www.lfb.it/fff/fumetto/test/v/vittorioso.htm>>.

²² My translation: “My soul enlarges by following his saints’ call. Rise your banners for deeds of peace and love only. Scorn the glory of the world and the gold of treason, plots and villainy. Praise the Lord. So be it.”



Fig. 1. Enrico Basari, *Beowulf: Leggenda cristiana della antica Danimarca*.
Brazilian version as *O Monstro do Caim*.

tion of this attractive reading of “Vikingness” with products as Richard Fleischer’s film *The Vikings* (1958, starring Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis) and Jack Cardiff’s *The Longships* (1963, with Richard Widmark) and based on Frans Gunnar Bengtsson’s Swedish novel of the same title (1941-45). However, the most important influence on these comics is, obviously, that of the comic book tradition itself, in special that of the title featuring the most remarkable ancient warrior, *Conan the Barbarian*.²³ Created by Robert E. Howard in the 1930s, the *Conan* stories appear in the wake of fantasy narratives connected to the circle of Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos.²⁴ Howard’s peculiar codification of the “sword and sorcery” world has defined the genre for the future and, although Conan is presented as a Bronze Age Cimmerian warrior, his imaginary world has become the popular image of a loosely defined Barbarian heroic age whose peculiar chronology comprises from the pre-historical to the early medieval period.

In fact, comics in general show little concern with accuracy in time representation; other barbarian/pre-historical superheroes as Thor, Claw the Unquered or Warlord, whose settings are some loosely defined ancient times too, have many similarities with the Beowulfs of the comic book; but the same is true for comics located in later periods as the aforesaid *Prince Valiant* and *Shining Knight* (5th cen-

²³ There is an episode in *Conan* 17 in which the Cimmerian hero faces an evil foe named Grendel. This is not the monster of the poem but a cruel human being who plunders towns and massacres their inhabitants but who still has a heroic chord. As Harvey indicates, author Bob Kane “has structured the story to reveal that Grendel has qualities worthy of admiration too, courage and pride” (125).

²⁴ See Donald R. Burleson, *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990); and Daniel Harms, “Cthulhu,” *The Encyclopedia Cthulhiana* (Oakland: Chaosium, 1998).

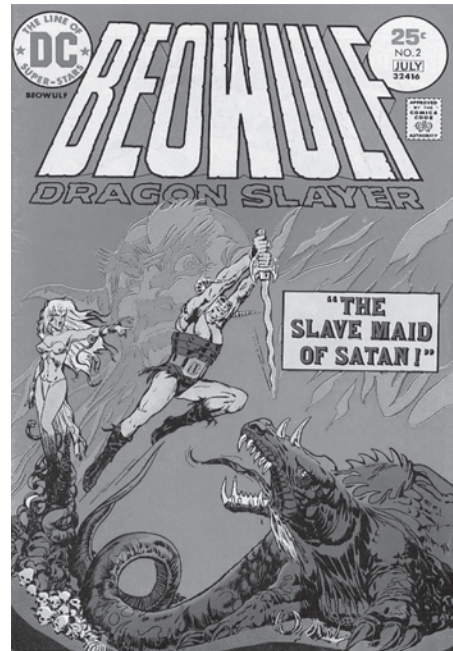
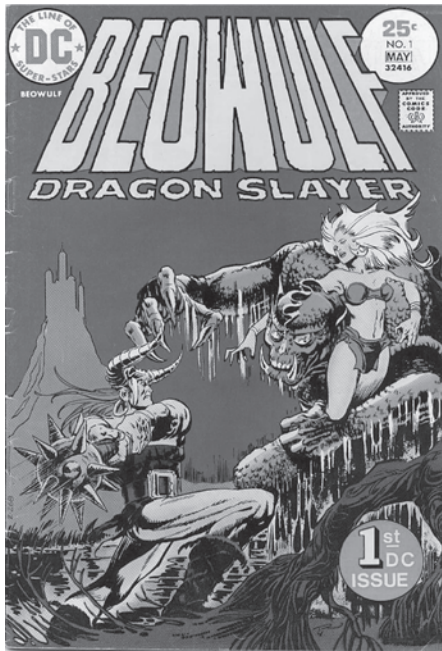


Fig. 2. Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte, *Beowulf Dragon-Slayer*.

ture), and *Black Knight* (6th century), or the more Scandinavian *Thorgal* (7th century) and *The Viking Prince* (10th century).²⁵ The protagonists of these works are outstanding warriors who, accompanied by not less brave “sidekicks,” always come to rescue the victims of awesome foes, both monstrous and human. As magic and sorcery usually play a central part in the plot of these comics, the corresponding Grendel-like characters incorporate features and attitudes of the modern supervillain appearing in all comics.

All these influences are present in the second attempt at rewriting the Old English poem as comic book, Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte’s *Beowulf, Dragon-Slayer*, published by DC Comics in 1974-75 (Figs. 2, 3, 4). The editors refuse from the start to take *Beowulf* seriously and claim that their intention is not to adapt a literary classic to the comic format, something that they scorn in their introduction to the series as “that thing educational” (vol. 19).²⁶ In contrast with

²⁵ It is not strange that an institution as Pace University used an image of Arnold Schwarzenegger featuring Conan the Barbarian in the film of the same title as illustration for one of its online sites for study help for the Old English poem. See <<http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/proj981d/main.html>>.

²⁶ American comics are generally distributed in an international market of English-speaking readers, who would be equally familiar with *Beowulf* as a topic.

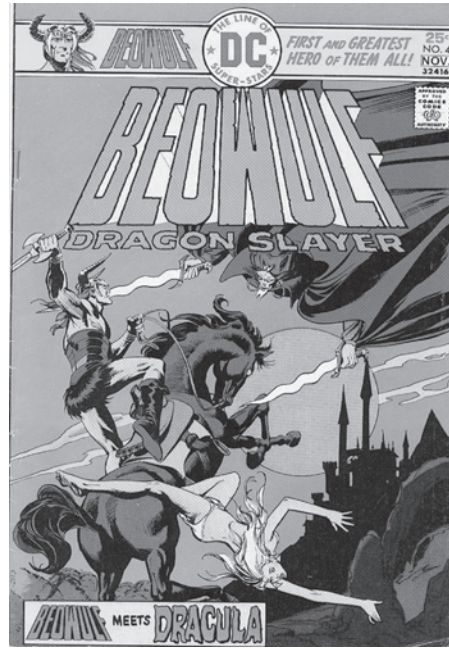
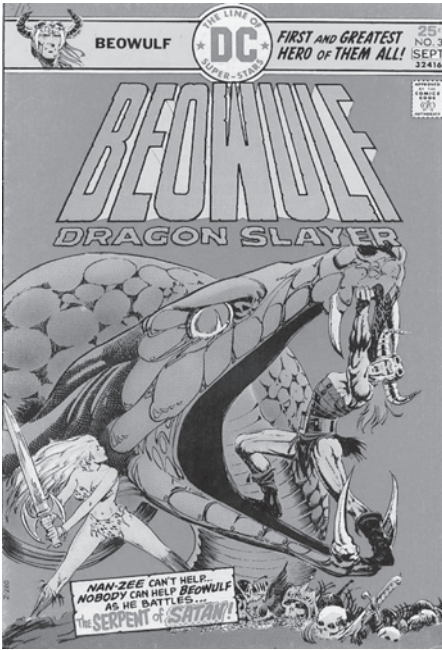


Fig. 3. Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte. *Beowulf Dragon-Slayer*.

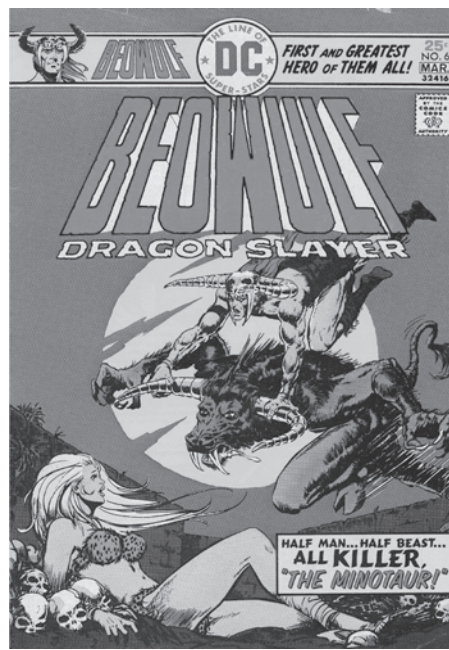
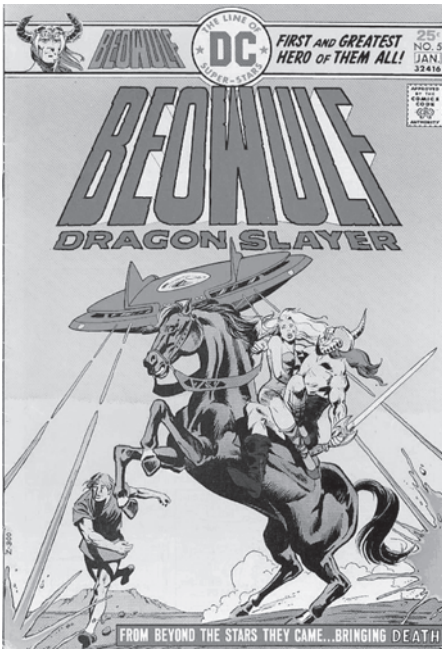


Fig. 4. Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte. *Beowulf Dragon-Slayer*.

Basari's seriousness and moral concern, here the new medieval superhero is reformulated as a roisterous muscleman enjoying his "sword and sorcery" world. This comic clearly obliterates the dramatic character of the original poem and its elegiac tone, an attitude that is reinforced by the plastic design of the work; the use of bright color and graphic conventions, with sequenced panels and large amounts of descriptive texts and dialogues, result in an artistic project that connects with the aesthetics of pop art.

At several levels *Beowulf: Dragon-Slayer* establishes a dialogue with the tradition of the comic as a genre. One element that the authors seem to have had in mind when appropriating the medieval text is that it focuses on terror; Uslan and Villamonte's intention is that of recreating its suffocating atmosphere of danger, but they transfer it to a Gothic scenario familiar to the readers of comic in the 1970s. As a matter of fact, in the illustrations Hrothgar's dwellings resemble more the gloomy skyscrapers of Gotham City as depicted in the *Batman* series than any historical Germanic hall; the "medieval touch," however, is added by resorting to the commonplaces in the presentation of the setting and social milieu: "*Castle Hrothgar* [my italics] —towering tribute to a conquering king... shelter for the vicious warriors of the Spear-Dane tribe! Housed within its cold stone is the great mead-hall —settings for songs of wandering minstrels, drunken free-for-alls, fiery women, unending feasts, bawdy stories... and terror!" (vol. 4, 6, Fig. 5).

On the other hand, we cannot forget that this entertaining Beowulfian fantasy is targeted at teenage readers, much more interested in extraordinary demons, zombies and sexy girls than in saving the moral values of Western civilization. Indeed, these elements typical of the comic are included in these modern Beowulf's stories, a real parade of all kinds of comic villains. If the first volume is just entitled *Beowulf, Dragon-Slayer*, the other five illustrate the complete refashioning of the medieval matter in the universe of comic: *The Slave Maid of Satan*; *Man-Apes and Magic*; *Valley in the Shadows of Death or, Beowulf Meets Dracula*; *Chariots of the Stars*; and *The Labyrinth of the Grotto-Minotaur*. In this way, we find anything from a femme fatale to vampires, UFOs and aliens or head-hunting pygmies side by side with creatures coming from classical mythology; that is, the monsters of the Old English poem multiply and are assimilated to more modern conceptions of evil according to popular fiction.

As in epic poetry and, conventionally enough, in many superheroes' stories, the adventures of *Beowulf* according to Uslan and Villamonte start *in medias res* and without any explanation of the origin of the conflict with his evil arch-enemy Grendel—who in this case is a minor devil, Satan's own servant. This information gap is a constant in further renderings of the poem as comic book, since the different authors seem to trust the reader's familiarity with the poem's characterization of Grendel as a devilish creature.²⁷ Nevertheless, and in contrast with Basari's

²⁷ At different points of the poem Grendel is described as "feond on helle" (101b, hellish fiend) "Caines cynne" (107a, descendant of Cain's kin), or "godes andsaca" (786b, God's enemy).



Fig. 5. Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte. *Beowulf Dragon-Slayer*.

work, in *Dragon-Slayer* this is not a moral or religious issue receiving a serious treatment; Satan here is just cast in the part of the Evil Overlord figure typical of comic. Besides, there are no clear chronological or geographical references to frame the story in a specific cultural context, which again does not seem to trouble readers used to the formulas of the genre.

Thus, Uslan and Villamonte articulate *Beowulf* as a barbarian superhero with a peculiar Scandinavian look; the protagonist wears a horned helmet made of an animal skull and a scanty loincloth, loves boasting and brawling, which gives him the look of other comics' heroes as Conan, Thor, or Warlord. Quite appropriately, *Beowulf's* partners and companions are four "tough guys": Wiglaf, Hondscio and Klenzo, and a giant African, Sydriit.²⁸ But there is an addition to this war-band that is absolutely absent from the Old English poem; *Beowulf's* favourite partner is an equally scantily dressed girl called Nan-zee. Ironic remarks on the part of the narrator as "Prince *Beowulf* speaks as an equal —with a woman" (vol. 1, 14) and replies by the female character as "you're pretty clever for a man" (vol. 1, 15) update the classic to an amusing version of the contemporary battle of the sexes. The sexy

²⁸ The first two names respond to characters in *Beowulf* and are presented as Viking heroes here, the other two are completely independent from the poem.



figure of Nan-zee is connected to heroines of other comics that were very famous at the time.²⁹ And after all, as one of the readers of this comic remarked in his letter to the publishers, scholarly fidelity to the medieval text might well be sacrificed for the benefit of a product more visually interesting for its target readers: “the inclusion of a female warrior, while non-existent in the epic poem, may be an advantage especially if Mr Villamonte retains his command of the female figure” (vol. 3, 19). In this sense, this *Beowulf*’s peculiar *comitatus* addresses racial and social questions as it reflects the social multiethnic reality of the US in the 1970s and echoes the rise of feminism; besides, by including a girl, *Dragon-Slayer* opens the way to the discussion of gender issues while at the same time allowing for romance, an aspect absolutely ignored by the poem and very recurrent in popular narratives. All these elements make *Beowulf; Dragon-Slayer* a light and lively product representative of the popular culture of its time. As the editors state in their introduction to the comic, “we’re not publishing a history textbook, but attempting to unite the symbolic elements that make the poem *Beowulf* the masterpiece it is” (vol. 3, 19). This approach will be prevalent in later comics.

A new *Beowulf* comic book appears in the following decade; written and designed by Jerry Bingham, his 1984 work presents an more “archaeological” rendering of the poem into plastic art. In general, the artistic concept of this comic book is quite modern; the vignettes are not always sequenced but overlap one another, perspective changes dynamically to stress certain moments in the narration, and there is a primitivistic intention in the portrait of this violent and barbarous universe. Bingham’s historicist approach eschews the licences taken by the previous comics and creates a visual *Beowulf*-world that closely follows the descriptions of characters, objects and places in the poem. Thus, the design of the weapons, garments and ornaments worn by the characters and the details in the recreations of the landscape realistically reproduce early medieval elements; only *Beowulf*’s horned helmet again seems to be a concession to the popular medieval imagery in the characterization of the Viking (Fig. 6).

Bingham claims he has adapted an “8th century epic poem” (1), and it can be deduced from his work that he documented his comic in scholarly translations of the text.³⁰ The opening lines of this comic are a summary of the first lines of the poem, “We have listened to many songs of the Spear-Danes’ fame, the mighty

²⁹ From early instances as *Catwoman* and *Sheena*, comic book superheroines have also deserved the audience’s attention. The erotic comic of the 1970s, however, redefines the female character with successful products as *Barbarella* (Jean-Claude Forest, 1967), Roy Thomas and Barry Smith’s *Red Sonja* (1973), or Frank Thorne’s *Ghita de Alizarr* (1979), with whom Nan-zee has in common her sex appeal.

³⁰ The dating of *Beowulf* is still under debate. See *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981); Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995); and Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier “Date, Author, and Audience of *Beowulf*,” *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997) 13-34.

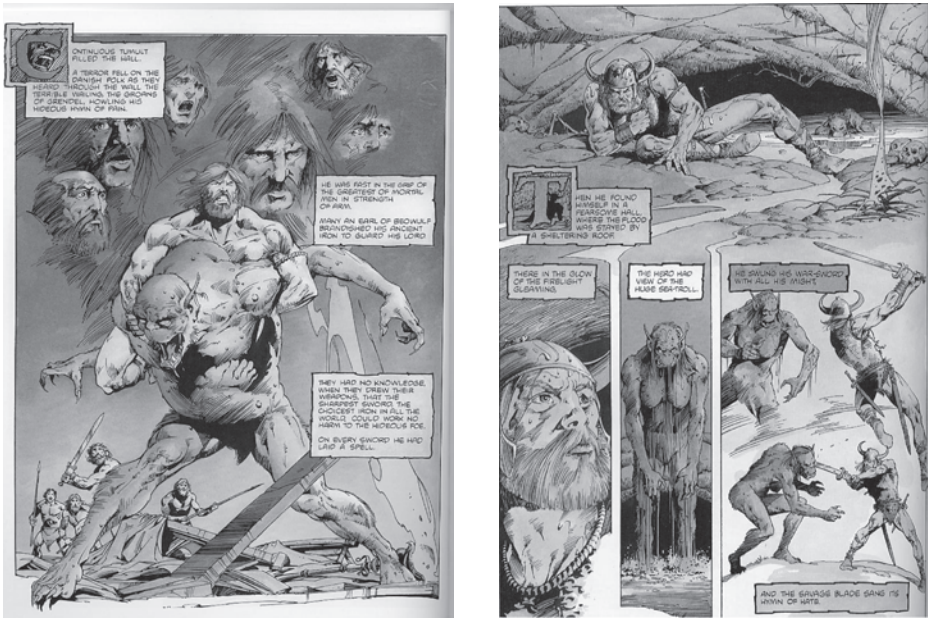


Fig. 6. Jerry Bingham, *Beowulf*.

splendour of old, their mighty princes, and deeds” (2). His introduction insists on the legendary character of the story as part of an ancient literary tradition, but Bingham resorts to the rhetorics of the comic book in the description of the superhero: “Born of a legendary time, coming from a land where legends are born, he crossed a Northern sea to make a mark in the pages of history that would long endure after the seas had turned to rivers and mountains to sand. He was of a noble breed. He was... Beowulf” (1).

We may detect an educational intention underlying this work, which styles itself in its cover page as a “graphic novel.” Most likely, Bingham seems to have in mind that the teenage reader of comics must have studied (no matter how fragmentarily) *Beowulf* as part of the literature syllabus, as by the 1980s it was part of the compulsory reading list in most schools. Thus, there are no explanations of the facts and situations as which appear in the story and the characterization and actions of the protagonists only make sense if one is beforehand acquainted with the original narrative and the Germanic legendary world.

In updating the epic matter to the comic book formulas, the story is reduced to the “hero vs. villain” conflict and many episodes of the Old English text are eliminated; besides, Bingham’s realistic approach leaves little space for magical powers and fantasy beyond the participation of the monsters, which are nevertheless presented more as animal-like creatures than as supernatural beings. Regarding the characterization of the protagonist, Bingham’s *Beowulf* is not depicted here as the superhero of comic but rather as one of the icons of modern masculinities, the

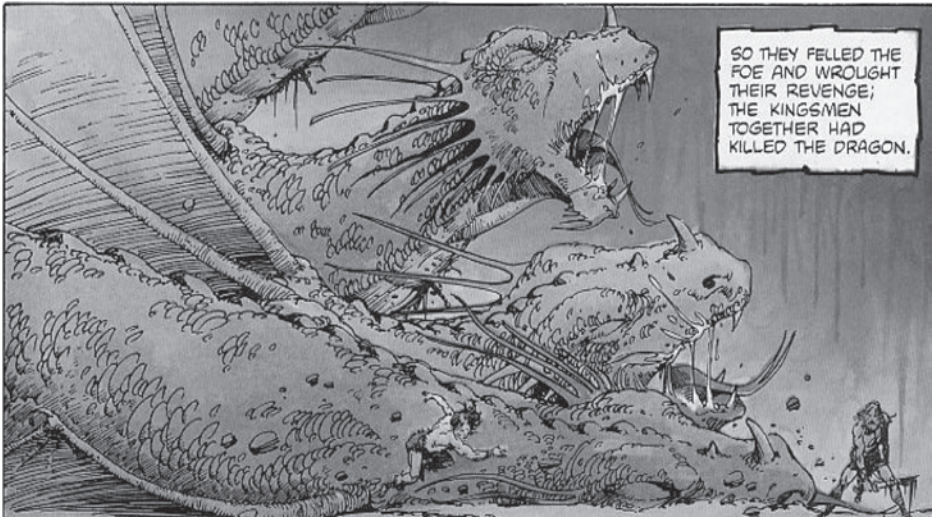


Fig. 7. Jerry Bingham. *Beowulf*.

“lone warrior” we have frequently seen in horror movies, the Western, and adventure novels, while the monsters respond to the clichés of both horror and folk narratives. On his part, Grendel is a blending of troll and the Scandinavian *draugr* or walking dead, as his looks remind one of the zombie or the vampire, while the dragon reproduces the well-established model of the zealous guardian of treasure as portrayed in epic poetry and folk-tales (Fig. 7).

One more recent *Beowulf* in comic format is Gareth Hinds' visually engaging work, which presents many similarities with Bingham's in its artistic concept. Published in 1999-2000 (later republished as compact book), it focuses on the hero's personal battle with the monster. This *Beowulf* depends greatly on Gummere's 1910 translation of the poem, who is credited by the author.³¹ Hinds incorporates all the modern design techniques of late 20th-century comic book art, as a superb use of colour and detailed anatomical drawing, a quick narrative rhythm in the sequence of images, and the inclusion of very limited text captions in the vignettes. Actually, the aesthetics of this comic is reminiscent of the videoclip because of its use of montage, narrative ellipsis and unconventional perspectives that dramatically changes from the wide, panoramic shot to the close up. Hinds' very stylized characters are endowed with movement and strength because of a masterly use of light and darkness, which is reinforced by the changes in visual focalization as the hero's and the monster' point of view alternate. The different size and distribution

³¹ Gummere's translation is nowadays outmoded; probably Hinds chose it because the publishing company no longer holds the copyright.



Fig. 8. Gareth Hinds, *Beowulf*.

of the narrative material in the panels stress the fight between the hero and the monster as in a postmodern *tableau*, as text is almost eliminated, and the author's elliptic presentation of the plot seems to assume that the reader already knows the story sequence; otherwise, the narrative would be incomprehensible (Figs. 8, 9).

The author also adapts the use of contrasting light and brilliant color of the "sword and sorcery" comic in the first part and resorts to black, white and gray inks in the section dealing with an ageing Beowulf's last stand. Interestingly, Hinds enhances his work with an archaizing, primitivistic style that makes his Beowulfian universe a very original and distinctive one. For example, he employs archaic fonts for the texts bits that certainly remind the readers of runes and Old English manuscript handwriting, and quite often frames the vignettes with fringes that reproduce early medieval metalwork. In this sense, this late *Beowulf* revisits the earlier comics in the wake of *Conan* and the epic fantasy genre and re-medievalizes them by inscribing the same elements in a visual world much influenced by archaeological reconstruction, also documented in Beowulfian scholarship. Because of its sophistication, this product does not seem to be oriented to teenage readers only, but its evocative character rather appeals to an audience with a deeper degree of familiarization with the Old English poem and early medieval, Germanic material culture. As most contemporary comics, this one seems to address a more mature reader than Uslan and Villamonte's or Bingham's previous adaptations.

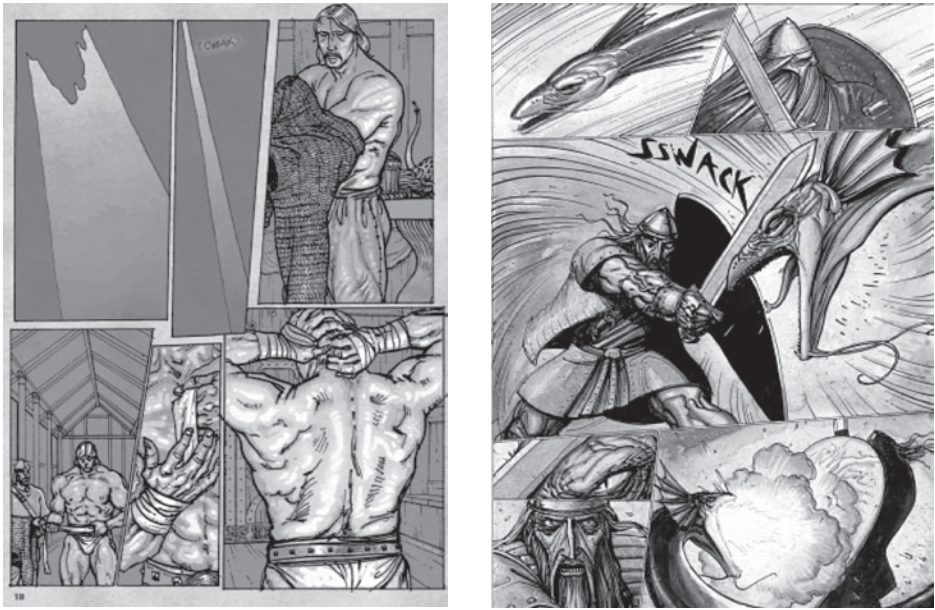


Fig. 9. Gareth Hinds, *Beowulf*.

A more recent rendering of *Beowulf* in comic is *Beowulf: A Different Shade of Gray*, by Francis Lombardi and Kevin Altieri, published in the French magazine

Metal Hurlant in 2003. This ten-page story contrasts to Bingham's and Hinds' more faithful approaches to the original poem and takes it again to a teenage universe by choosing as narrator a boy. This is Wiglaf, a bold youngster who anachronistically serves as page to Beowulf. Likewise, except for Beowulf the other characters do not respond to the ones in the poem as once more the hero's war-band includes an archer woman warrior; oddly enough, there is a sorcerer named Higlac who, in a clear concession to the formulas of the epic fantasy comic, tries to defeat the monster with his spells.

Lombardi and Altieri condense the plot into one single combat between the hero, accompanied by his war band, and the monster, and endow the narrative with a very pessimistic tone. The setting of the story is remarkably Scandinavian: Beowulf is a Viking prince who, on board of his "drakkar," arrives at one of his people's colonies undergoing a monster's attack. The narrative is subverted when, instead of Grendel and his mother, the only evil creature in this version is a three-eyed dragon. However, it does not spew fire nor has any supernatural power; in fact, the dragon looks rather like a dinosaur, a characterization that—as in Bingham's *Beowulf*—stresses more its animal nature than its monstrosity (Fig. 10).

As a consequence, the hero's combat against the monster loses its epic quality, particularly when in the end it is revealed that the creature was not moved to assault the humans out of hatred, like Grendel in the poem, or just in order to keep its hoard hidden, as expected in any dragon coming from the Germanic legendary stock. This pitiable foe turns out to be a female dragon, somehow a substitute for Grendel's mother, which attacked the colonists to prevent their advance into the territory where she had nestled. Wiglaf is the one to find out, but when he does it is too late to save the friendly, newly born little monster in the nest and the she-monster's other eggs.

This comic revises the Beowulfian narrative in the light of a contemporary issue, environmentalism, and addresses the question from a sort of pro-ecological ideology whose basic principle is respect for and understanding of wild life. This preoccupation turns to the ethical with the sad end of the story as Wiglaf questions the humans' reasons to kill the mother dragon. In previous comics the delimitation of good and evil was clearly unmovable in ontological terms since the human and the monstrous were presented as irreconcilable elements. Nevertheless, Lombardi and Altieri revisit *Beowulf* in the light of other modern treatments of the poem and redraw the borders of the conflict.³² The tragic event of the slaughter of the dragon has moral consequences for the monster-killers in spite of Beowulf's claiming that one has no time to consider his enemy's reasons right in the middle of the combat. However, the hero's strict delimitation of good and evil seem to be no longer valid

³² This reading of monstrosity has a parallelism with the rendering of the story in some novels rewriting *Beowulf*, as for example Larry Niven, Jerry Pournell and Steve Barnes' science-fiction works, *The Legacy of Heorot* (1987) and *Beowulf's Children* (1995), and Parke Godwin's novel *The Tower of Beowulf* (1995).





Fig. 10. Frank Lomabard and Kevin Altieri, *A Deeper Shade of Grey*.

for young Wiglaf, who thinks that they made the wrong choice by slaying the she-dragon and her brood: “Après cette expérience, la noirceur des ténèbres que nous combattions devient à mes yeux un peu plus grise” (23, Fig. 10).³³

The latest *Beowulf* in comic is a series created by Brian Augustyn in 2005 and still in course whose title is *Beowulf: Gods and Monsters*.³⁴ This new Beowulf is not a Viking warrior but a 20th-century hero living in Manhattan. His superpowers are his exceptional physical strength and longevity, as in spite of his young looks he is the same character of the Old English poem who has survived until present day. Likewise, his personality and ways have been adapted to his new urban environment, and even his name has been shortened to a more colloquial “Wulf.” If, on the one hand, the modern Beowulf still fights against giant troll-like monsters similar to Grendel in the darkest streets of New York, on the other his mission projects into the future, as his task—as most superheroes—is to watch for an undefined catastrophe to come. This endangered world is the post-nuclear, industrialized, apocalyptic setting we have seen in many other comics, popular novels, films and television series (Fig. 11).

Augustyn’s comic does not really add many new elements in its recreation of *Beowulf* except for his incorporation of the latest graphic techniques and trends of the art of the comic book. When interviewed about the reasons that made him choose *Beowulf* as inspiration, creator Brian Augustyn claimed that he was searching for “someone not as overexposed as Hercules, Alexander or King Arthur, but “familiar” [emphasis added]. Gilgamesh or Finn McCool might have worked too, but I’ve always loved the dragon-slayer hero—and saw his old specialty a nice metaphor for the evils and dangers of the modern world. Here there still be dragons, but now they’ve learned to blend in.”³⁵ The understatement here is that, at this point in the history of the revisiting of the medieval text by diverse popular genres, the knowledge of the poem does not matter any longer beyond the interest for the intrinsic violence of the heroic society it recreates. The comics’ reading of the Dark Ages reshapes this universe according to the economy of good and evil in popular genres, drawing on the apocalyptic vision of contemporary neomedievalism; as Fradenburg notices,

The neomedievalism of our period often takes the form of the fantasmatic relocation of “medieval” privation and risk in a future that prophesies certain aspects of the Real of the present: [...] survivalism, the fantasy of culture as survival, cult as and cult of preparedness, postplague, postapocalypse, technological bricolage,

³³ My translation: “After this experience, the blackness of the shadows we fought turned a bit greyer to my eyes.”

³⁴ The series, still published by Speakeasy Comics, was devised by Augustyn up to volume 4. From volume 5 to volume 7 it was later taken on by a different artist, Attila Adorjany, but still conforms to Augustyn’s original idea.

³⁵ See this interview at the comic site Comic Book Resource, <[http:// http://comicbookresources.com/news/newsitem.cgi?id=4693](http://http://comicbookresources.com/news/newsitem.cgi?id=4693)>.





Fig. 11. Brian Augustyn, *Beowulf*.

monkish techniques of preservation of knowledge, fully militarized hypermasculine vigilance, living to fight and tell. (209-10)

As this panoramic revision of *Beowulf* in comic shows, its appropriation by popular culture is a consequence of the parallel process experienced by the poem in high culture, that is, its canonization and recognition as a central piece in the cultural heritage of English-speaking communities. But the new creators use this reputation as an eye-catcher to entice new audiences with the glamour of an old, vaguely known story with heroes and monsters. The explanation for the recurrence of *Beowulf* as comic book matter is probably that the new renderings depend directly on the continuous redefinition and construction of the parameters of the epic genre by this media. In the comic book the figures of the superhero and the monsters contextualize this cosmic fight, already present in the Old English poem, into the world to which contemporary readers belong. This “aggiornamento” chooses to ignore the literary conditions of the original to make it saleable, thus erasing the borders between high and low culture. As a form of reappropriating the classic, *Beowulf* as comic book offers the same advantages that John D. Niles notes about the “serious” translations of this ancient medieval poem into modern languages, as they convey “a powerful work of the literary imagination into terms that, far different from the original poet’s, may still be compelling for readers in our own time” (859).

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