



## Hypersexualized Monsters in ›Beowulf‹ Director's Cut

von Alan Lena van Beek



**This essay explores the 2007 cinematic adaptation of ›Beowulf‹, written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary.<sup>1</sup> It will focus on narration, sexuality and virility in the original poem and hypersexualized bodies in the movie. Gilded genitalia, absent genitalia and the sharp objects constantly threatening to castrate Beowulf are being analysed as a cultural text.**

An outstanding aspect in the 2007 cinematic adaptation of ›Beowulf‹ when comparing it with the original Old English poem is its remodeling of the monsters to fit an internal genealogy. The monsters of the first and second part, Grendel and the dragon, are connected via Grendel's mother as a unifying element. The "sins of the fathers" (›Beowulf‹ 01:19) perpetuate a monstrous genealogy, since it is made clear from the beginning that Hrothgar is responsible for siring Grendel with the water demon. Beowulf thus continues the mistake of his progenitors: Despite his heroic deeds, he impregnates the mother with another child to replace Grendel. His offspring will grow up to be the dragon which comes back to haunt him in the second part of the story.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the connection between the monsters in the original poem might seem somewhat lacking to modern recipients, this strategy is an attempt at making the story more

---

<sup>1</sup> ›Beowulf‹ Director's Cut (USA 2007), written by Neil Gaiman and Rogery Avary, directed by Robert Zemeckis. The following screenshots and citations will be labeled as ›Beowulf‹ Director's Cut (2007) with time stamps HH:MM and were made by me.

<sup>2</sup> The cursed gold of the original poem is also woven into the mixture: Fafnirs horn serves as a symbol for the hoard.



palatable to a block buster audience. It emphasizes the connection between the monsters and the motivation for bloodshed and battle becomes more pronounced.

This is also a strategy native to heroic epic and heroic saga. Joachim Heinzle has named reduction, assimilation and coordination as the basic principles of heroic tradition (Heinzle 2003/2004, p. 11). The movie adaptation also assimilates and coordinates several key elements into a cycle of events. The key element in the movie adaptation, the one affect joining the two halves together, is not, for instance, medieval-minded revenge, but lust.<sup>3</sup> As every modern adaptation of medieval material is wont to do, it reveals more about the culture adapting it than about the original. The monstrous body as “pure culture [...] incorporates fear, desire, anxiety” (Cohen 1996, p. 4) of the civilization which produced – or adapted – it. This essay wants to explore the many ways in which the movie hypersexualizes its medieval monsters and heroes – and why the culture which produced it might work out some of its own problems in the process.

Beowulf's virility is the immediate solution to Grendel's terror but also the problem which propagates the existence of monsters in the long run. If he had resisted temptation, Grendel's mother would have remained childless and the cycle would have been broken. Obviously, Hrothgar made the same mistake before him, and the ending leaves it unclear if Wiglaf, Beowulf's loyal companion, will not also succumb to the charms of the water demon. The genesis of another monster dooms his reign. None of the kings have human sons – continued genealogy is a problem since Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's and then Beowulf's wife, refuses to sleep with them.

This questionable heroic virility opposes Christian values as embodied by Unferth and Wealhtheow. The original work also being produced in what Tolkien called a “time of fusion” (Tolkien 2007, p. 20) the movie further explicates the Christianization of the heathen culture. Odin and God are frequently contrasted, e.g. Unferth wants to pray to the new God and is shown to have become a faithful Christian in his later years. He also condemns Hrothgar's merrymaking. The king's portrayal as an obese drunk who lounges around his mead-hall half-clad is far from flattering. Wealhtheow punishes this behavior and his past mistake by refusing to sleep with him.<sup>4</sup> She also turns to Christianity in old age. Tropes of masculine promiscuity and inebriation are contrasted with Christian integrity, displaying a curious fascination with heroic masculinity and chastising it simultaneously.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This analogy is by no means perfect: Modern viewers have a different demand of coherency than recipients of medieval heroic poetry. I want to emphasize how elements are moved and joined by a common human affect – typically, in heroic epics, greed, revenge and such.

<sup>4</sup> In the original script, Wealhtheow phrases this explicitly: “Monsters come out of your cock. How can I let you inside me, knowing you were in her?” (Avary / Gaiman 2007, p.77).

<sup>5</sup> This pattern repeats on a microscale with the wench Hondsheow tries to “swife“ before Grendel's approach. She also rejects him due to the imminent monster (see Bosworth 2014).



Having established this dualism permeating both works, the encounter with Grendel and his mother will be analyzed with a close look at the heroic and monstrous and very naked – though shamefully obscured – bodies.



When Beowulf takes off his clothes to fight Grendel, multiple objects obscure the hero's penis from view, most memorably when a sword falls onto the table while he advances in his attack on Grendel (›Beowulf‹ 00:38) (Credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures).

This creates a comic effect. Due to the customs of American cinematic culture, the on-screen display of primary and secondary genitalia is problematic. America's Puritan heritage has a very complicated history with the portrayal of sexuality. Although harsh ratings allow little nudity and sexual content (and swearing)<sup>6</sup> to be seen in mainstream,<sup>7</sup> this culture has less problems with gore and violence. The movie features a portrayal of a romantic notion of primal pagan violence, whereas the original 'Beowulf' contemplates, at its most basic level, humanity's violent struggle against time and mortality. But the movie adaptation infuses this portrayal

<sup>6</sup> When Neil Gaiman was asked "Did you consciously write it for an R rating in the US?", he replied: "We wrote it as the story – really not caring if we were R rated or NC17 or anything. But once Bob Zemekis [sic] said we were going to try for a PG13, the main agenda became: 'Take out the word f\*\*\*\*\*g or any word that resembles it.' So we went in and modified it. Then the first time we met Ray Winstone – who had only read the first draft of the script – he came up to us and said: "You know, lads, you've done a great job on the script. I love it. You know what I really like is all the swearing." We had to tell him that we'd just been taking them all out and trying to find very, very old English versions of them so that nobody will know they're swear words. He simply responded: "Oh f\*\*k." It's obviously a movie for adults that some young teens can sit through comfortably. A 15 certificate is where it sits most comfortably." (Forsythe 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Motion Picture Association Guideline: <https://www.filmratings.com/RatingsGuide> (Page View: 26.4.2021).



of violence with an equal amount of sexuality. Through these hypersexualized bodies, the culture that produced this movie reveals its fears and desires.

A further analysis of the bodies of Grendel and his mother will reveal more peculiarities of this process. Grendel is a monster, a mearcstapa (Jack 1994, 1.104) who wanders the borderland isolated from civilization. As an uncivilized creature he fights without weapons – and without clothes. Beowulf fights him on the same level by taking off his clothes rather than fighting with a sword. He defeats and eventually kills Grendel by ripping off his arm.

Dana Oswald (2010, p. 86) has argued that this arm has a phallic value in the original poem. According to Oswald, its Ersatz-Phallus, his arm, is ripped off. In the director's cut, Wiglaf first tries stabbing the monster where he can reach it from his relative height and also where it would be most effective: his genitalia. But Grendel has an astonishing blank spot where his testes and penis ought to be. This is even commented upon. Whereas Beowulf has to be inventively covered up while he moves about the mead-hall fighting Grendel, the monster itself has no phallus. It is being desexualized and thus remains inoffensive.

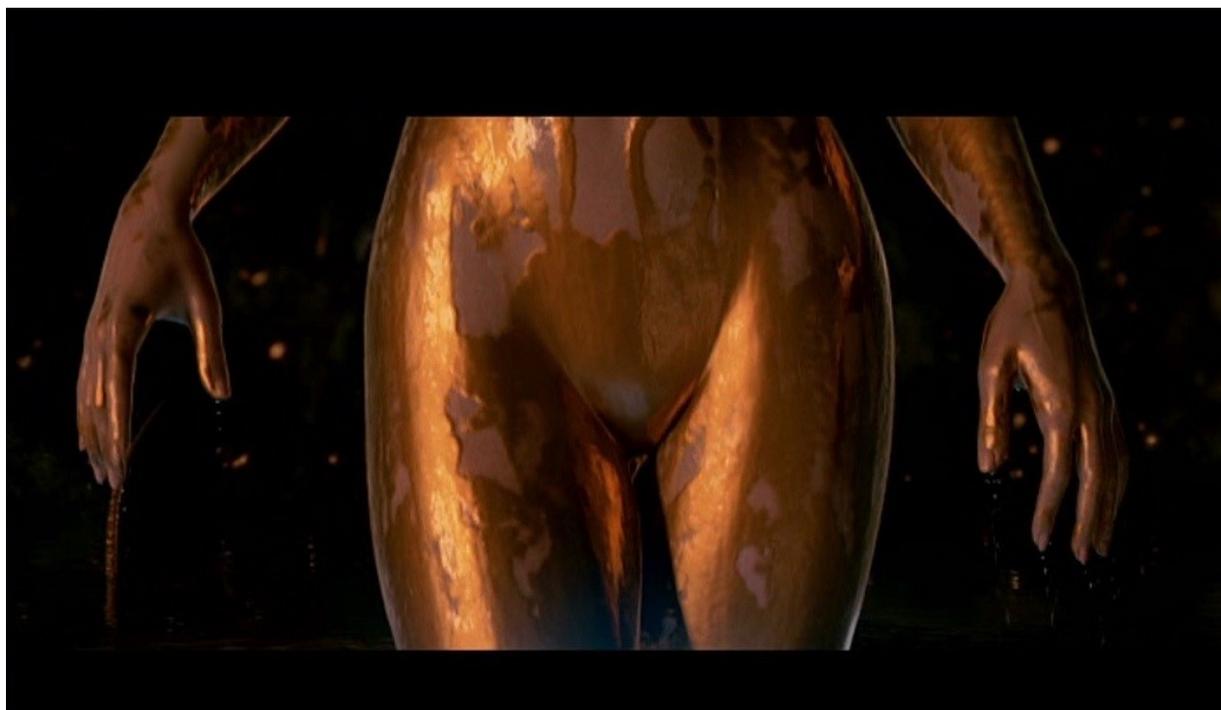


“I swear, the bastard has no pintel!” (›Beowulf‹ 00:39) (Credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures).



A similar trend in censorship is prominent in Asia, e.g. Japan. Genitalia are pixelated, even when viewing explicit sexual content. Not unlike Grendel, e.g. in the manga and anime series ›Attack on Titan‹ (›Shingeki no kyojin‹) by Hajime Isayama, the titans' genitalia are also absent by default. (Credit: Hajime Isayama, *Attack on Titan*, vol. 19. Aus dem Japanischen von Claudia Peter, Hamburg 2017).

Looking at Grendel's mother, portrayed by a body model and motion-captured by sex-symbol Angelina Jolie, her primary and secondary genitalia are also obscured from view. Her hyper-feminine body is covered in liquid gold, the male gaze pans her body (›Beowulf‹ 00:56).



Her breasts and vulva are covered up with liquid gold and neither nipples nor labia show through (›Beowulf‹ 00:56) (Credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures).



This feminine body already sexualized by its large breasts and perfect physique is further hypersexualized by adding another modern symbol of “anticipatory mating”,<sup>8</sup> displaying her buttocks and calves (00:57).

A key scene of the original poem is altered in order to change the outcome of the plot. The water demon is not vilified and killed, but she is being remodeled into a seductress bearing all the modern markers of attraction. In the original, Grendel's mother can only be killed with a sword made by giants, relating the instrument of her demise to her monstrous origin. The sword's blade liquefies in her poisonous blood (Jack 1994, l. 1615-1616) and Beowulf can only return the hilt to Hrothgar.



When Beowulf enters her cave, she rises up from the water, displaying a tail and rendered high heels (›Beowulf‹ 00:57) (Credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures).

The movie interprets the motif of the disintegrating sword quite differently. The sword serves as a phallic symbol when Beowulf is being seduced by her offering of her body and an empire. The heroic and the monstrous converge in the middle of the underground cave pool. Intercourse is imminent. The water demon's dominion can be read as a symbol of a female womb.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> „Pfennigabsätze scheinen ausschließlich der Antizipation reproduktiver Selektion zu verdanken zu sein” (Keller 2003, p. 204).

<sup>9</sup> Mills 2015, p. 10 also points out various other spilled liquids and their significance.



When she caresses Beowulf's sword Hrunting, it liquefies and spills into the water (›Beowulf‹ 00:59) (Credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures).

This can be construed as Beowulf spilling his seed into her uterus. The sword, the phallic symbol of heroic masculinity, which has masked his manhood in the earlier fighting scene, now becomes the inherent problem. His masculinity and his seed are not the source of his victory, but his downfall.<sup>10</sup> By having intercourse with the sexy demon he engenders another monster in the cycle that he was called upon by Hrothgar to break.

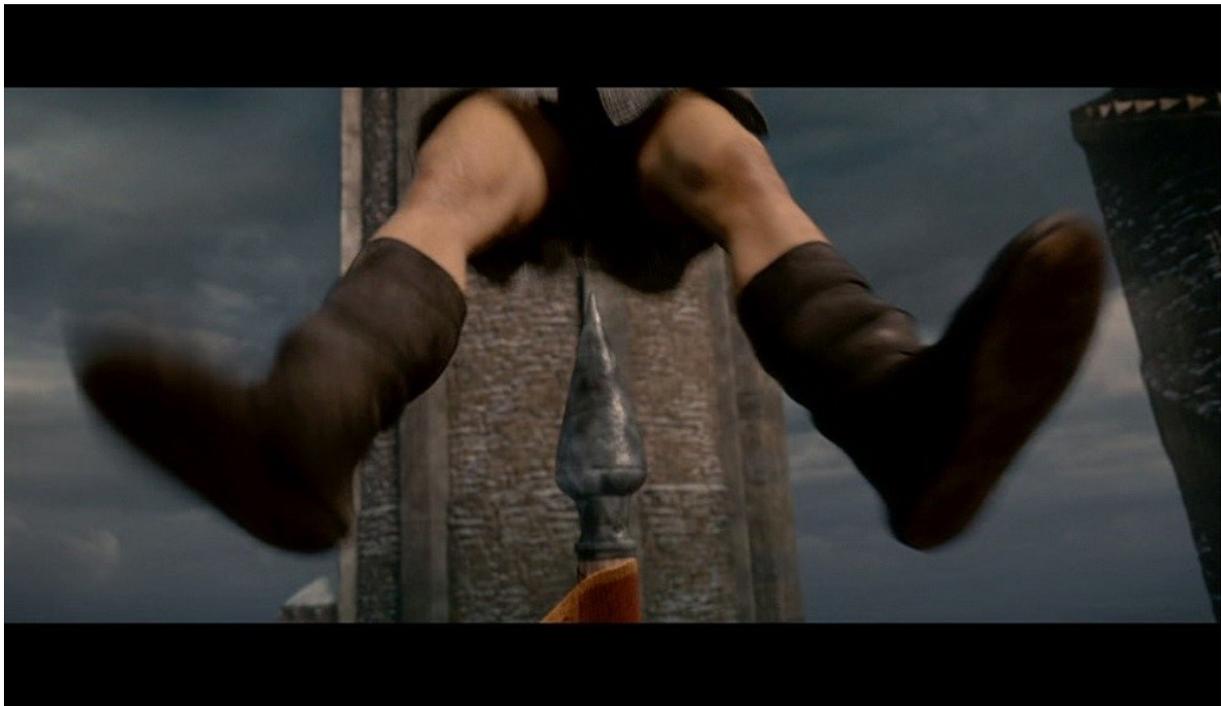
In the original, only Grendel's head is taken back as proof for Beowulf's deeds. The text never bothers to explain the lack of evidence for the death of Grendel's mother. One might argue that in the medieval mindset trophies of female foes bring no glory. E.g. in the Middle High German ›Eckenlied‹ only Ecke's head serves as a (problematic) proof of his death, but his female relatives serve no such purpose (Boyer 2012). Female body parts as trophies of victories are uncommon (Cohen 1999, p. 64-65). But in the movie this absence of proof is immediately called upon:<sup>11</sup> It shows that Beowulf has not eliminated the source of evil and committed a shameful sin.

<sup>10</sup> Mills 2015 also argues that Hrothgar and Beowulf may be rendered impotent. "As well as these indications of sexual failure and frustration, the principal male characters display an odd lack of external genitalia when naked" (Mills 2015, p. 11). She "also suggests, in an archetypal reading, that the all-powerful mother has shaped her children in the womb as castrates" (Mills 2015, p. 12). The dragon and Grendel are "neutered".

<sup>11</sup> Roger Avary published his notes after reading Beowulf, and his questions include Grendel's parentage and the absence of proof of his mother's death. "Though it's not in the poem, clearly, Grendel was Hrothgar's bastard son. He had sired the child in exchange for worldly wealth and fame. But ill-gotten gains always come back to haunt you - at least in the epics I was weaned on as a boy. And what of Beowulf? Surely he wasn't telling his thanes the full truth. Had he given into the siren-witch and accepted her offer of gold and glory for his seed, which she needed in order to procreate?" (Avary / Gaiman 2007, p. 5-6).



Introducing the Christian concepts of sin and shame to this pseudo-heroic culture of hypermasculine virility, Wealtheow and Unferth serve as vehicles not only for the progressing Christianization in the movie, but also as agents of the significance of Christian religion in modern culture. In adapting the Old English poem, this culture reveals its current relation to the concepts of masculinity and sexuality. This heroic virility has to be kept in check. The protagonist's sexuality is being hinted and poked fun at, but cannot be portrayed directly. Beowulf's virility is constantly being challenged by seemingly trivial tokens. Sharp objects threaten to castrate Beowulf constantly: Warriors narrowly miss him while thrashing on the table, the dragon drags him over many a pointy tree top while flying back to the castle (›Beowulf‹ 01:25).



The dragon lowers him unto a spire which only narrowly misses his monster-engendering family jewels (›Beowulf‹ 01:49)  
(Credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures).

One might call this attempt at humour “thin and cheap” (Tolkien 2007, p. 9), but looking back to Tolkien's famous first defense of the Old English poem, qualifying an element of a narration as cheap does not age well (Tolkien 2007, p. 9). Rather, it can be argued the sharp objects constantly threatening to castrate Beowulf are “undeniably weighty” (Tolkien 2007, p. 9). And one need not even seek out Freud for that argument (Mills 2015, p. 10). Due to America's complicated relationship with the portrayal of nudity and sexuality, the male genitalia which play a major part in the movie's plot are paradoxically out of the picture. While Grendel's fatherlessness remains prominent in the original and the monster delineates from Cain, the first murderer, the movie inserts Beowulf and Hrothgar and probably others before them as fathers and calls them sinners. One type of Christian sin, fratricide, is being replaced with another, lust.



Beowulf's hypersexualized body cannot be displayed in full, so its problematic bits are covered up with humorous scenes. The movie continues to poke fun at his genitalia, as if to cover up its own desires and anxieties at dealing with this epitome of virility in a cinematic culture where the display of such bodies and behaviors is severely limited. His masculine body is in constant danger of being eliminated because he has committed a shameful sin due to the ambivalence of his heroic nature. It can be a source of great power, but in dealing with Grendel's mother's sexuality, also his downfall. The monsters and the hero are hyper- and desexualized in a way that demonstrates a deep level of discomfort with the themes it superimposes upon the early medieval heroic epic.



## RECOMMENDATION FOR CITATION

Alan Lena van Beek, *Hypersexualized Monsters in ›Beowulf‹ Director's Cut*, in: *Mittelalter Digital 2, Ausgabe 1* (2021), S. 1-11.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

Avary / Gaiman 2007: Roger Avary / Neil Gaiman, *Beowulf. The Script Book*, New York 2007.

Jack 1994: *Beowulf. A Student Edition*, ed. George Jack, Oxford 1994.

### Secondary Sources

Bosworth 2014: Joseph Bosworth, *swifan*, in: *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller / Christ Sean / Ondřej Tichy, Prague 2014 (<https://bosworthtoller.com/29784>, Page View: 26.4.2021).

Boyer 2012: Tina Boyer, *The Headless Giant. The function of severed heads in the ahistorical (aventiurehafte) Dietrich epics*, in: Larissa Tracy / Jeff Massy (Ed.), *Heads will roll. Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination*, Leiden / Boston 2012, p. 137-158.

Cohen 1999: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis 1999.

Forsythe 2007: Coco Forsythe, *Poetry In Motion Capture*, in: *Future Movies 2007* (<https://www.futuremovies.co.uk/filmmaking/poetry-in-motion-capture/coco-forsythe>, Page View: 26.4.2021).

Heinze 2003/2004: Joachim Heinze, *Was ist Heldensage?*, in: *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft 14* (2003/2004), p. 1-23.



- Keller 2003: Rudi Keller, *Sprachwandel. Von der unsichtbaren Hand in der Sprache*, 3., durchges. Aufl. Tübingen / Basel 2003.
- Mills 2015: Alice Mills, *Hero, Monster, Masturbator: Gaiman and Avary's Beowulf*, in: Nadine Farghaly (Ed.), *Beyond the Night: Creatures of Life, Death and the In-Between*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, p. 1-17.
- Oswald 2010: Dana Oswald, *Monsters, gender and sexuality in medieval English literature*, Woodbridge 2010.
- Tolkien 2007: John R. R Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, in: Christopher Tolkien (Ed.), *The Monsters and the Critics and other Essays*, London 2007, p. 5-48.