

Medieval Monsters: Beowulf and Beyond

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Introduction

Beowulf

- *Beowulf* is the most famous work in Old English.
- It is the most-studied poem in English before *The Canterbury Tales*. (Chickering I)
- It exists only in one manuscript: Cotton Vitellius A.xv
- It is the single work that influenced J. R. R. Tolkien the most. (Shippy 344)
 - Wrote the refutation essay, *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*
TL:DR Poems about monsters are worthy of study you self-important jerks
- George Luis Borges calls it, “...a German Aeneid.” (Borges 8)
 - “...the monsters were symbols of the powers of evil; they were taken very seriously by the audience (Borges 9)

History of the Manuscript

Dating of *Beowulf*

- *Beowulf* was created sometime between the 7th century and the 11th century. It is a part of the Nowell Codex and is bound with four other works. (Faulkner 171)
- Beowulf's liege lord, Hygelac of the Geats, was killed in a raid on the Frisians in 521. This was recorded by Gregory of Tours in 594. (Chickering 247)

Manuscript History

- The Nowell Codex almost died in a fire while in storage with the Cotton Family in 1731.
- The British Museum took possession in 1753 and catalogued it as Cotton Vitellius A.xv
- Two copies of the singed manuscript were made by Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin in 1815.

The Manuscript

D PÆT PE GARDE
na in 7 ear dazum. þeod cýnninga ¹²⁹
þrym ze frumon huda æþelingas elles
fre medon. oft scýld scepung sceape
þreatum monegū mæghum meodo setla
of teah ^{curved} esode eorl syddan ærest petra

Reading of Beowulf



Hillsdale College Professor of English, Justin A. Jackson, reads the opening lines of *Beowulf* in Old English.

The Issue of Translation

Beowulf is a poem composed in Old English. Old English is different enough from Modern English to require translation.

- Translation as Interpretation
 - Translation for meaning
 - Translation for sound
- Anglo-Saxon Poetic Nuances
 - Kennings
 - Whale-road
 - Ring-giver
- Structure
 - Prose/Poetry
 - Alliteration – repetition of sound in closely connected words
 - Caesura – break in the center poetic lines

The First Three Lines of *Beowulf* Illustrating the Use of Caesura

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in gēar-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hū þā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

So. The Spear-Danes
and the kings who ruled them
We have heard of those princes'

in days gone by
had courage and greatness
heroic campaigns.

Dramatis Personae

Monsters Abound



Beowulf

Overly aggressive Anglo-Saxon frat boy or tragic hero? (277-81)

Possesses the “strength of thirty men in each hand” (378-9)

Super fast swimmer and slayer of sea monsters everywhere (506-81)

Will fight anything or anyone - has no chill (419-24)

”He ruled it well for fifty winters, grew old and wise/as warden of the land.” (2107-109)

Strong enough to hug-crush a guy (2405-407)

“Is that a dragon over there? Hold my mead.”

The statue of Beowulf, the Guard of the Castle Garibald in Russia
Copyright: LedSv

The Monsters

What of these monsters? They are described as:

“prowling the moors, huge marauders from some other world. One of these things, as far as anyone can ever discern, looks like a woman; the other, warped in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale bigger than any man, an unnatural birth called Grendel by the country people in former days. They are fatherless creatures, and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts.”
(1348-57)



This guy recommends a diet that includes consuming at least one Dane nightly before bed.

(Image by JetPack7)

Grendel

Super bitter about all the partying at Heorot (115-135)

Invulnerable to weapons – Come at me bro! (800-3)

”Greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men from their resting places” (122-123)

Attacks for twelve winters (147)

“dark death-shadow” (159-160)

“...while a baleful light,/f lame more than light, flared from his eyes.” (725-6)

“Every nail,/ claw-scale and spur, every spike/and welt on the hand of that heathen brute was like barbed steel.” (983-6)

It takes four Danes to spear one Grendel head (1636-7)



Grendel's Mum

Can and will kill a Dane (1224-7)

“Grendel's mother, monstrous hell-bride.” (1259-60)

Possesses “savage talons” (1512)

Is called the “Swamp-thing from hell” (1518)

Referred to as a “Tarn-hag” (1519)

Is a “The wolf of the deep” (1599)

Fights with a dagger (1542a)

Maintains her own “armory” (1558)

Loves her son, underwater caverns, and killing. It takes a Beowulf wielding a giant's sword to defeat her (1556-18)

The Dragon



#gonnakillageat

Source: Friedrich-Johann-Justin-Bertuch [Public domain])

The dragon is meant to represent the evil side of heroic life: Malice, greed, destruction (Heaney 114)

He seriously just wanted a nap but someone had to B&E and now he needs revenge (2219)

Is an, “Old harrower of the dark” (2279)

”The burning one who hunts out barrows,/the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky with streamers of fire.” (2281-283)

Burns down Geatland and Beowulf’s home (2325-326)

“Horde-guardian” (2294)

Thinks he’s a badass - actually is a badass – the farmers are terrified (2283-284)

“When a chance came, he caught the hero/in a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs/into his neck” (2690-692)

Adaptations

The Dreaming the Dream of Beowulf

Beowulf in Popular Culture

Beowulf has inspired creators to adapt it in a variety of mediums.

- Print Media
 - Books
 - Comics & Graphic Novels
- Other Mediums
 - Games
 - Board Games
 - Video Games
 - Movies
 - Music
 - Opera
 - Theater

BEOWULF
PULLED
MY
ARM
OFF
KARI MAAREN



Artwork by Erik Mohr

Beowulf in Popular Culture: Film

Thirteenth Warrior (1999)

- Directed by:
 - John McTiernan
- Script Based On
 - *Eaters of the Dead* by Michael Crichton
- Features:
 - Antonio Bandaras
 - Vladimir Kulich



Buliwyf (Vladimir Kulich) and Eben (Antonio Bandaras)

Beowulf in Popular Culture: Film

Beowulf (1999)

- Directed by:
 - Graham Baker
- Script by:
 - Mark Leahy
- Features:
 - Christopher Lambert
 - Rhona Mitra
 - Oliver Cotton



Beowulf (Christopher Lambert) and Kyra (Rhrona Mitra)

Beowulf in Popular Culture: Film

Beowulf and Grendel (2005)

- Directed by:
 - Sturla Gunnarsson
- Script by:
 - Andrew Rai Berzins
- Features:
 - Gerard Butler
 - Hringur
 - Ingvarsson
 - Spencer Wilding

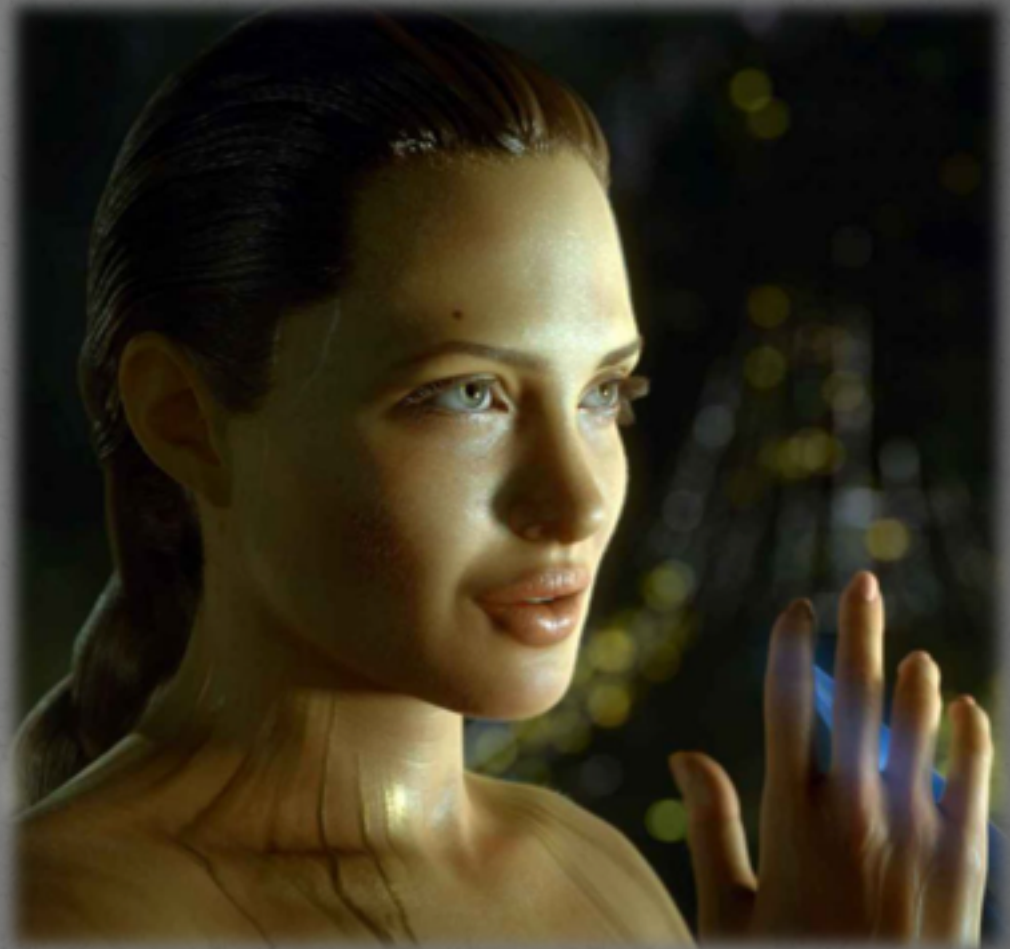


Gerard Butler as Beowulf

Beowulf in Popular Culture: Film

Beowulf (2007)

- Directed by:
 - Robert Zemeckis
- Script by:
 - Neil Gaiman
 - Richard Avery
- Features:
 - Angelina Jolie
 - Crispin Glover
 - Anthony Hopkins

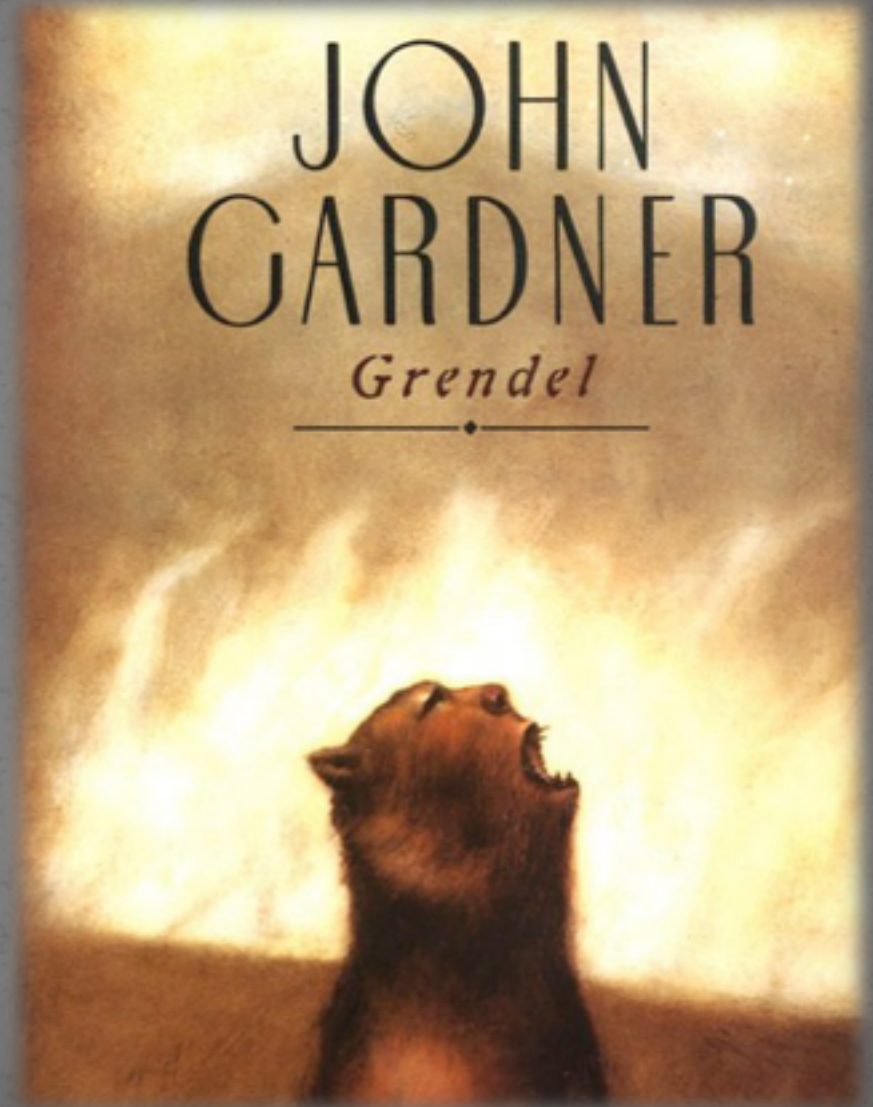


Angelina Jolie as Grendel's Hot Mum

Beowulf in Popular Culture: Books

Grendel by John Gardner (1971)

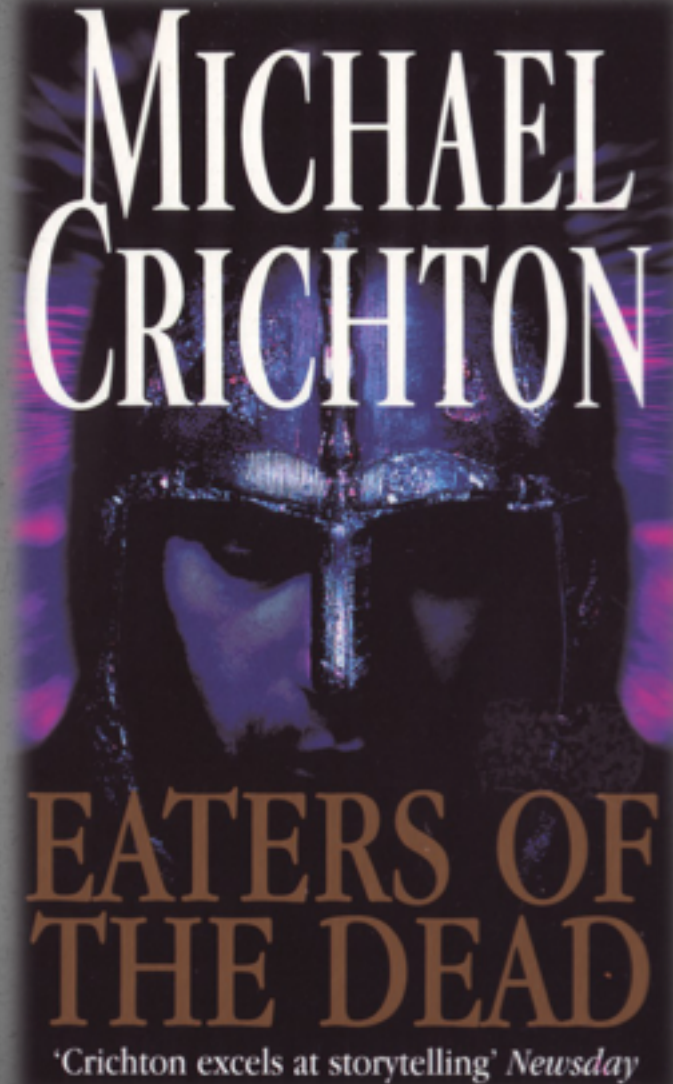
- Focuses on Grendel Pre-Beowulf
 - “He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which spit all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side, he said in effect.” (Gardner 51)
- Grendel encounters the dragon and the dragon recommends,
 - “My advice to you, my violent friend, is to seek out gold and sit on it.” (Gardner 74)



Beowulf in Popular Culture: Books

Eaters of the Dead by Michael Crichton (1976)

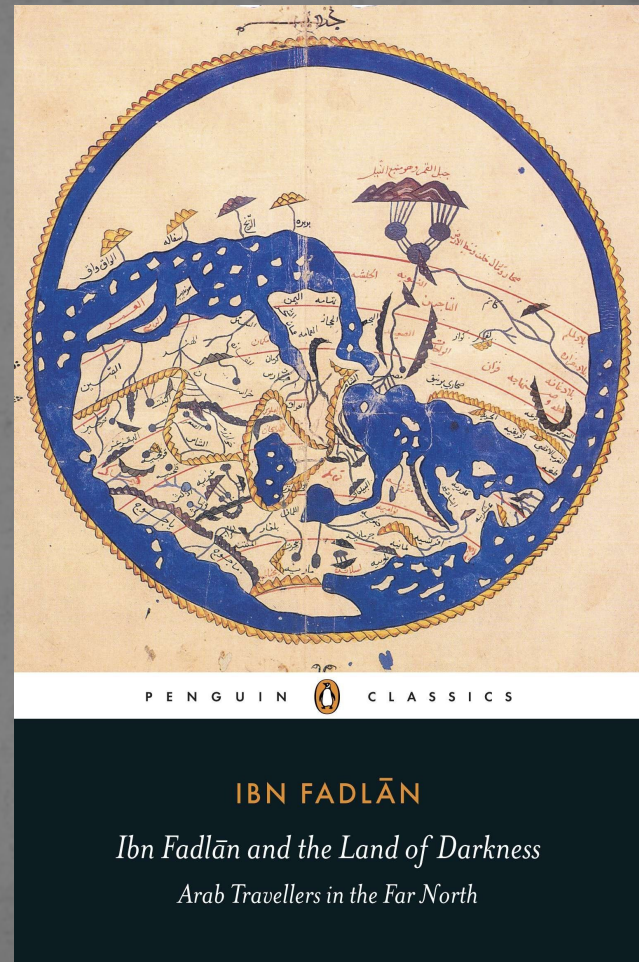
- Uses the observations of Ibn Fadlan to deliver the story as the narrator.
 - “This is the book of Ahmad ibn-Fadlan...” (Crichton 17)
- Crichton chose to alter the names.
 - “This hall is called, among the **Rothgar** peoples, by the name of **Hurot**, for the Northmen give the names of people to the things of their life, to the buildings and boats and especially to the weapons.” (Crichton 83)
 - “I know of this man, for I have sent for him on a heroes' mission. He is **Buliwyf**, and I knew him as a child.” (Crichton 84)
- Crichton employs the use of numerous individuals under one name to stand in for Grendel.
 - “...the name of “wendol,” or “windon,” is a very ancient name, as old as any of the peoples of the North Country, and it means, “the black mist.” (Crichton 93)
- Grendel's Mum is also altered, slightly.
 - “To kill the wendol, you must strike at the head and the heart: you must overcome their very mother, in the thunder caves.” (Crichton 149)



Beowulf in Popular Culture: Books

Who was Ibn Fadlan and what is the *Risala*?

- Ibn Fadlan really existed and wrote what we call the *Risala* (circa 921-922) when traveling with the Rūs, Swedish Vikings
- Fadlan makes no mention of Beowulf
- Crichton picked key observations of the Rūs by Fadlan during his journey north.
 - “Every day without fail they wash their faces and their heads with the dirtiest and filthiest water there could be.” (Fadlan 47)
 - “There I see my father and my mother. There I see all my dead relatives. There I see my master sitting in paradise and paradise is green and beautiful.” (Fadlan 50-4)



Conclusion

“Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel”

“Fate goes ever as fate must” (455)

Suggested Reading

Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*:
A New Translation

J. R. R. Tolkien's, *Monsters
and the Critics*

The Word Exchange
edited by Greg Delanty

Tacitus' *Germania*

Jane Smiley's *Saga of the
Icelanders*



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