

Drinking and Debauchery: **Fifty Ways to Leave Your *Beowulf* (Butchered)**

Viola Miglio
University of California, Santa Barbara

McDuff: What three things does drink
especially provoke?

Porter: Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and
urine. Lechery, sir, it provokes and it unprovokes:
it provokes the desire, but it takes away the
performance. Therefore, much drink may be said
to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him,
and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him
off, it persuades him, and disheartens him;
makes him stand to, and not stand to; in
conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and,
giving him the lie, leaves him.

W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene I (25-33)

1. Introduction

Granted: approaching medieval literature as a modern reader presents its challenges, both because the language is often unfamiliar or even unintelligible and because we are entering a world whose values and frame of reference we no longer understand without special training. Making it palatable to a modern cinema audience may therefore seem an unattainable goal under the best of circumstances. The discussion in this paper focuses on two filmic renditions of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, an anonymous masterpiece composed between the eighth and tenth century based on fifth century literary motifs, vaguely identified historical events and common Germanic folklore (cf. Fulk et al, in the Introduction to *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 2008) and contained in a single 10th or early 11th century manuscript, the London British Library Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The filmic renditions analysed are Zemeckis's 2007 performance capture *Beowulf* (the Hollywood version), and Sturla Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005, a Canadian-Icelandic production): they both deviate from the original poem, but given their closeness in date, the different treatment is so considerable as to warrant comparison. There are some obvious differences imposed by the quasi-animated medium in Hollywood-*Beowulf* (perhaps *Hollywulf*?), which allows for many more spectacular effects (and some ludicrous ones), and the quasi-archaeological rendition of material culture in Gunnarsson's film, where the attention to detail is excruciating, down to the natural dyes used for the costumes, in order to avoid anachronism (cf. the director's commentary on the DVD version).

I will playfully enumerate at least fifty ways in which the original poem has been butchered, focusing mainly on drinking and feasting, but I will also argue that, while both films impose a modern interpretation of the events in the original plot, as well as adding characters and explaining away motives at will, the Canadian-Icelandic version at least offers a much more hopeful message of tolerance than the Hollywood version. Zemeckis's *Beowulf*'s screenwriters, Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary grossly and wilfully overinterpret motives, betraying the stern grandeur and complex nature of the original poem and essentially create a plot of a much more 'basic instinct' type, which may be

justifiable in terms of box office success, but it also reveals a sinister ideological twist of reducing all motivation behind every action to lust. Zemeckis's *Beowulf*'s message entails that chopping enemies to bits is fine (plenty of gore and splatter confirms it), but sex and carnal desire (and their excesses as embodied by lust) are the root of all evils.

This particular point is hard to drive home when the producers aimed at a PG-13 rating, and this is one of the masterful ways in which *Hollywulf* solves the problem (see below), beckoning to an audience of 'barely legal' male, video-game-toting teenagers, who certainly won't miss the beauty of the original text, since they barely read required texts for school.

2. Drinking and Debauchery in Zemeckis's *Beowulf*

2.1 The Plot and the Figure of King Hrothgar

The opening scene focuses on the banquet celebrating the completion of Heorot, the mead-hall built for feasting by Hrothgar, the Danish king. The warriors of the king engage in very loud cavorting, eating, drinking, burping, urinating collegially (while discussing the pros and cons of the new religion, Christianity), and exhibiting generally lecherous behaviour. These are already six of the 50 ways to butcher *Beowulf*...

This initial scene stands out because it essentially sets all themes of the film, or rather, variations on the main one – lust as the root of mankind's problems, which is in marked discordance with what the original poem portrayed. (Seven and counting).

The first element that stands out is the out-of-place delicate beauty of a girl, who - the viewer soon learns - is actually Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen. According to Germanic conventions, and to the original poem, the queen would indeed be expected to be at her companion's side, also possibly serving mead and words of praise to the king and his warriors, according to a strict hierarchy of political and social importance. Instead in the film she looks disapprovingly at her husband's drunken and unbecoming demeanour. The queen, who looks about 17 years old in the film, makes her dislike obvious, and - can we blame her? Hrothgar is, as in the original text, presented as an old man: '[...] Hrothgar sat, / an old man among retainers;' (l. 356, and cf. (3) below). Her youth and her behaviour in the film add up to nine of the fifty ways to butcher *Beowulf*.

In the poem, however, Hrothgar is the respected, essentially good, beloved and upright king of the Danes, who laments not being able to rid his country and his people of the scourge of Grendel, a monster with some human traits, who preys on his people, and kills them especially when they make merry in the mead-hall.

Hrothgar is described in these terms in the poem, after a very flattering genealogy, in true Germanic style¹:

- (1) l. 64 The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.
 Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
 young followers, a force that grew
 to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
 to hall-building: he handed down orders
 for men to work on a great mead-hall
 meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
 it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Seamus Heaney's modern version of the poem.

his God-given goods to young and old [...]

And later he is described as 'our noble king' (l. 351), 'the protector of the Shieldings' (i.e. the Danes, l. 371)', and also (l. 919):

- (2) [...] the king himself,
guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person,
walked in majesty from the women's quarters
with a numerous train, attended by his queen
and her crowd of maidens, across the mead-hall.

Even when he accepts help, he is always described in a dignified light (l. 607):

- (3) The grey-haired treasure-giver was glad;
far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
and keeper of his people counted on Beowulf [...]

The image of the old king in Zemeckis's film is that of a fat, half-naked, drunken, and lecherous old fool (let's say 13). His only redeeming trait is that he does try to fight Grendel, who clearly avoids fighting the old king, since in the film, Hrothgar is Grendel's human father (a very important 14).

The hall, as the king declares, is to be a monument to 'merriment, joy, and fornication' in the film, and alcoholic drinks flow, as huge roasted pigs are brought to the table, and plenty of joy and fornication, or generic ogling and debauchery abound. This would not necessarily be distasteful per se, but it becomes unsettling as the other pieces of the puzzle are revealed. Thus, Hrothgar –who sired Grendel the monster with a water-witch played by Angelina Jolie- has no heir, and this is related to 'his shame', as Wealhtheow puts it when speaking to Beowulf: the shame and secret of having begotten a semi-human monster with a mere-woman, and more pragmatically the fact that Wealhtheow in the film refuses to sleep with him (no heirs², no consummation: 16). This unconsummated marriage is well identified by a spiked board that divides the king and queen in the marital bed. Once Grendel has been killed, Hrothgar symbolically removes the board, but his queen, already swayed by the young hero, wants none of it (17). Hrothgar solves the problem of being childless by bequeathing his reign -and queen- to Beowulf, after his death. Once those words are spoken and the message is received and accepted, he matter of factly proceeds to fulfill his promise by unsheathing his sword (harakiri? ironic Freudian phallic symbol of his impotence?) and plunging to his death by walking off the ramparts of the mead-hall (which for the occasion resembles more Hamlet's Elsinore than a Germanic mead-hall) and onto the wave-swept beach below (suicide and Hamletic anachronism: 19). One is left wondering why he commits suicide brandishing his sword.

The pattern of sterility and debauchery repeats itself later within the reign of Beowulf himself: this time the queen loves him, and is age-matched to him, and we have no reason to believe the marriage was not consummated this time. But many years later, when the dragon comes to plague the Danes now under Beowulf's wise rule (20), we find

² In the original Wealhtheow mentions their 'two sons', l. 1183.

out that the king has had many lovers (21, the character Ursula, a young maidservant, is the last one of them), and has no heir³. Or rather, he does, but it is a son in the shape of a dragon (22), at least until his death, when he recovers a partly human semblance. As the tongue-in-cheek reviewer for *Movie Cynics* put it: 'Lesson Learned: Don't stick your dick in a chick with a tale [sic].' But Zemeckis's men never learn, and even old Wyglaf, the most trusted of Beowulf's men, is seen in the last scene recovering the golden goblet (23), a symbol of greed and lust, and by extension, human weakness, and staring at the sea-monster (24). He takes a few steps towards her (fully dressed but entering the water nonetheless), as she beckons to him from the waters where Beowulf funeral ship has just sunk in a blaze of glory (and we will stop counting at 25).

The closing scene is surely a tribute to Polanski's 1971 *Macbeth*, where Malcolm's younger brother Donalbain is seen as he enters the witches' lair and the viewer surmises that he will presumably repeat the cycle of envy, greed, and violence that brought Macbeth to murder Duncan to seize the Scottish crown. Violence, greed, and power, entailing the bleakness of a cyclical future, are in Zemeckis's film subsumed under the paradigm of lust. Curiously enough, despite the outcries of the conservative right in the U.S. (of the Medvev's type) that Hollywood undermines and attacks traditional values, this film seems to send a message that clearly supports traditional values, as especially embodied by the survival of Wyglaf as the new king. Violence is accepted and justified, and as long as we do not know the truth everything can and should continue as usual (exemplified by the attempted confession of his 'sins' by Beowulf that Wyglaf refuses to listen to); sex on the other hand is to be practiced secretly, and its outcomes are shameful and mostly evil; men are lecherous pigs but they are outwardly heroic, women are whores, witches or –a small minority- saints, nothing in between. This is nothing that we have not read regarding several powerful representatives of the right-wing movement, in the U.S. at least – so Hollywood does support 'traditional' values!

But the saintliness of Wealhtheow is not enough to save the flawed (read: lustful) hero. She is seen disapproving of Hrothgar's debauched behaviour, she seems to be praying when Grendel attacks Heorot for the first time, possibly to reinforce the fact that the story is supposed to take place at a time when heathens are being converted to Christianity and there is a certain syncretism of the two religions. She is accompanied by a monk as the older woman of the last part of the film, and certainly shows the other cheek by being friendly to Beowulf's young lover, even risking her life to save her from the dragon's attack. Way to go, girl!

2.2 The original significance of the mead hall and of drinking

The OE scholar Hugh Magennis observes very keenly that the verb *drincan* 'to drink' in Beowulf is only used in the singular once and transitively only twice. The first observation indicates the conviviality of drinking in the poem – the only exception being when the monstrous Grendel drinks one of Beowulf's men's blood. The same example is one of the two where the object of the verb is expressed (in this case to underline the atrocity of what is being drunk, i.e. blood) and once after Grendel's death when the Geats are relaxing and celebrating – in this case, the object of drinking, 'wine', is probably

³ Beowulf has no heir in the original poem either, a very important point that contributes to the somber mood of the close of the poem. After his death, the Geats are in fact afraid that their enemies will finally defeat them and death and slavery will ensue (ll.3150-5).

required by alliteration (l. 1233 *wæs – win – weras* ‘[...] There was the best of feasts; / the warriors drank wine [...]’, translation by Magennis 1999, 26). Magennis’s observation clearly point to the function of drinking in *Beowulf* as symbolic, and not actual – of course the film-makers need to be able to show that something is being drunk, but the feasting scenes in Zemeckis’s film wildly deviate from the role that the *Beowulf* poet ascribed to drinking, they are much closer to the vision of *Macbeth*’s porter quoted above.

In Germanic heroic poetry, it is never the act of drinking as essential to human life, that is highlighted, but rather always the communal, convivial drinking. Hence, drinking has a highly symbolic cultural value in Germanic fiction – especially in epic or heroic poetry, including OE and specifically *Beowulf*. It is not surprising then, that the drinking of water – as a purely physical requirement – has no place in Germanic heroic poetry. The one remarkable exception, of course, is Siegfried bending over the brook, revealing the spot that allows Hagen to kill him with his spear. Siegfried is allegedly drinking water, in reality, he is giving the *Nibelungenlied* poet the perfect posture to reveal all of Hagen’s treachery, I am arguing that it is crucial that it is water that is being drunk here: it is the one act of drinking that reveals the human side of the quasi-invincible Siegfried.

Otherwise, drinking in Germanic fiction means alcoholic or manufactured drinks (mead, ale, wine, and at times sour milk or milk products in ON literature). This is not necessarily, or not solely, because of a penchant for drunkenness among the Germanic peoples, but since such drinks were more precious and reserved for special occasions than water, in literature their use has to be more symbolic than actual. Magennis (1999, 23) states in fact that, although there was a hierarchy of drinks, with alcoholic drinks being most appreciated (with wine, mostly an imported good, at the top), and water at the bottom, in OE poetry in general, as well as in *Beowulf*, the actual drink did not matter: mead, wine, ale and beer are interchangeable (often due to the requirements of metre or alliteration).

What mattered was the conviviality of drinking together: celebrating victories, establishing and confirming allegiances and social hierarchies, and an occasion for the leader to demonstrate generosity (in the form of gifts and entertainment). This was part of the important ritual of reciprocity: the warriors pledged allegiance to an elected leader, by whose side they would fight in battle, and in turn the leader would recompense their efforts with gifts⁴. A warrior society such as the early Germanic one had little use for women in such convivia: it is not that they were banned, they were there in a subordinate role (guests or servers, depending on rank and occasion). They did not do the drinking (or at least it has not come across in the literature, except for rare exceptions). They facilitated it by pouring the drink and making speeches depending on rank. *Wealhtheow*

⁴ Receiving a gift was also a type of binding agreement: this meant that the receiver was somehow bound to the giver – hence many a complicated interaction could ensue, if a gift was offered by someone towards whom the receiver did not want to be ‘in debt’. A masterful example is found in *Gisli’s saga*, when Vésteinn, brother in law of the eponymous hero Gisli, offers Thorkell (Gisli’s brother) precious gifts that he refuses despite various entreaties by Gisli himself. Thorkell dislikes Vésteinn because of jealousy (Thorkell’s wife has a soft spot for Vésteinn) and plots his death, and cannot therefore accept gifts from Vésteinn, which would imply allegiance. After much debating, Vésteinn storms out with his gifts stating that he has not come to buy his life off. He is killed later that night.

in fact encourages the king to drink in the original poem, in the celebration after Grendel's death (l. 1168):

- (4) Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord;
 raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats
 duly and gently, discourse with them,
 be open-handed, happy and fond.

In all the feast descriptions in the poem, some motifs are repeated (Magennis, 1996, 62): 'drinking, the hall setting, the dignity and nobility of the participants, the attendance of serving stewards, music, the giving of gifts, the presence of women, the physical splendour of the scene, rejoicing and speeches.' The two elements of gift-giving and women are not present in the initial scene, however, unlike in the film, where at least women are very prominent (in a provocative or lewd context).

2.3 The Character of Beowulf and Drink

In accordance with Germanic tradition, in the poem, Beowulf drinks in the context of feasting:

- (5) l. 1019 Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
 with a gold standard as a victory gift, [...]
 So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;
 it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts
 in front of the hall-troops. [...]

This is the second time the poem specifically mentions Beowulf drinking - he 'accept[s] the cup' from Wealhtheow (l. 628) in the first feast – and in (5) after his fight with Grendel and the monster's death. Again, it is a ritualised type of drinking, mentioned at the same time as gift-giving, the important symbol of reciprocity in Germanic warrior culture.

In the film, however, Beowulf mentions – albeit half-jocularly – drinking immediately upon arrival in the king's presence: 'I've come to kill your monster ... and to taste your mead'. To which the queen replies that many have come to taste her lord's mead, but they have not been so successful as to kill the monster. Beowulf insists that 'I have drunk nothing yet, but I will kill your monster'.

Both in the poem and in the film, Beowulf's official motive for seeking to kill the monster is fame. 'If we die it will be for glory, not for gold' says Beowulf in the film. Fame earned during a man's lifetime is –in Germanic culture – the equivalent of immortality. In this sense, to be fair, the film is faithful to tradition (as embodied for instance in the sayings of the *Hávamál*, 'The Words of the High One' i.e. Odin) and to the poem.

The gnomic poetry of *Hávamál* is also very explicit in chastising excessive drinking, not as an unhealthy habit of course, but because it brings loss of dignity, it entails lack of restraint and betrays foolishness. Beowulf seems to embody these common sense virtues in regard to drinking, as expressed in his exchange with Unferth, Hrothgar's Counsellor, both in the poem and this film.

Drink (and possibly envy) is, in fact, singled out as the cause for Unferth's taunting of Beowulf at the first feast – this the hero recognises both in the poem and in the film: 'I find it difficult to argue with a drunk' says the character in the film, which roughly parallels Heaney's '... Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer that was doing the talking' (l. 530). Perhaps 'drunk' in the film is worse, implying that this is a habit of Unferth's, whereas the exchange is clearly stylised in the poem, it is a kind of flyting, like the verbal tauntings found in Old Irish and Old Norse poetry (*MacDathó's Pig* and *Lokasenna* are just two of several examples from each tradition respectively).

However, Beowulf in Zemeckis's film proceeds to lie about why he lost a swimming contest with his friend Breca: with considerable dramatic irony, the viewers see Beowulf dropping his sword while he fights with a sea-monster resembling more a mermaid than a leviathan. At the same time Beowulf is heard declaring 'I killed the monster with my own blade', which can only be interpreted metaphorically and opens the door to lust as the main man's flaw in the film. In the poem, none of this -except for an actual fight with sea monsters- can be surmised as being the reason why Beowulf lost the swimming contest with Breca.

Unlike in the Porter's speech in *Macbeth*, lust and drinking do not go together in the character of Beowulf in the film, but lust, desiring the king's wife and lying certainly do (depending on sources, all can be considered deadly sins). Beowulf also lies again about Grendel's mother's death: 'I plunged my sword into her chest... again and again' he states rather predictably, since the audience has seen him give in to the beauty of Angelina Jolie-turned-sea-witch. The result will be the second scourge of the Danes, the semi-human dragon.

Beowulf's lust is hinted at both when he unnecessarily sends the poor enthralled queen scurrying out of the mead-hall by stripping almost naked before her ('the demon has no weapon' he states – and therefore he will fight with his bare hands, and when he strips almost naked to descend into the sea-witch's cave. The bare-handed fight with Grendel is taken from the poem, but the film takes *bare* to the next level, i.e. Beowulf fights literally naked – to secure a PG-13 rating of the film, during the considerably long fight scene, there always manages to be an object 'accidentally' covering Beowulf's genitals in frontal images – needless to say the result is rather ludicrous. The contrast with another naked fight scene is inevitable, even if the result could not be more different: the sensuality and involvement the viewer feels when watching the masterful sauna fight scene involving Viggo Mortensen's character in Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises* (2007). This fight scene shows at the same time how beautiful bodies can be and what kind of brutal hard work it is to kill someone.

2.4 Grendel and Drinking

Again one has to wonder if Beowulf meant 'no weapon' as 'no genitals' about Grendel, since in the film we have seen that 'sword' very often means 'phallus'. That the monster has no genitals is actually commented on later during the fight in an exchange between Beowulf and his loyal companion Wyglaf.

The human or demonic character of Grendel brings me to the last section on Zemeckis's film. Grendel in the poem is clearly a 'he' (OE distinguishes three genders, and Grendel is not neuter), and yet this does not mean he is human. There is absolutely

no moment in the poem when we doubt of the demonic nature of Grendel: his first attack is in response to hearing not just the merry-making in the mead-hall (l. 86), but also the

- (6) l. 90 song of a skilled poet
 telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
 how the Almighty had made the earth
 a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
 in His splendour He set the sun and the moon
 to be the earth's lamplight, lanterns for men [...]

He is described from his first appearance as 'a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark' (l. 86), 'a fiend out of hell' (l. 100) and is constantly associated with darkness, just as in the passage above God is associated with light. And just as the mead-hall represents civilisation (Magennis, 1996) and order, his cave is the negation of the first. Whatever is human in the Danes is countered by some aspect of Grendel's bestiality⁵. He has no motive whatsoever in the poem to hate and envy the Danes, other than they are creatures of God and he is not. In this sense he is truly of Cain's progeny, he is an outcast from the realm of God and the good. His motives are therefore hatred and envy, which are the same that brought Cain to kill his brother in the Biblical story. Roger Avery, one of the script-writers, is stated as interpreting Cain's progeny very literally⁶:

- (7) It occurred to me that Grendel has always been described as the son of Cain, meaning half-man, half-demon, but his mother was always said to be full demon. So who's the father? It must be Hrothgar, and if Grendel is dragging men back to the cave then it must be for the mother, so that she can attempt to sire another of demonkind. (in Ambrose, 2007)

If one accepts the complex background of the poem as written by a Christian author using ancient Germanic motifs, historical events and folk-lore for a medieval Christian audience, then of course there is no need for this over-interpretation. The medieval mind accepted that there was an order sanctioned by God and that it could be subverted by the enemies of God, who were by definition evil, without any further need to refine their motives⁷.

That Grendel is evil in the poem we know also by his type of eating and drinking. If the Germanic mead-hall drinking was a refined and symbolic activity of communion, Grendel's eating human flesh and drinking the warriors' blood is not only at the antipodes of Germanic culture, it is also the most repugnant act in medieval Christian conception, as inherited from the Old Testament.⁸ Tearing the flesh and drinking the warriors' blood puts Grendel on a par with animals, specifically dangerous animals living on the outskirts of civilisation and preying upon it when least expected. In this sense,

⁵ See for instance Magennis's poignant discussion (1999) of the use of the verbs *eten* ('eat' as reserved for humans) and *freten* ('eat ravenously, gulp down' usually reserved for animals, as in the modern German cognates *essen/fressen*).

⁶ Also reported in the Wikipedia article on the film: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf_\(2007_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf_(2007_film))

⁷ See Earl, 1979, especially pp. 85-6.

⁸ Magennis, 1999, 25, especially notes 25, 26. This author also notes the irony of this type of feasting on human bodies carried out in the Germanic mead-hall, as if it were an anti-feasting.

Grendel shares these characteristics with the wolf, ON *vargr*, which was perhaps not surprisingly also a term used for outlaws, dangerous criminals living far from the civilised world of the mead-halls. *Mortuum refare*, or *Wealreaf*, the profanation of corpses was a particularly heinous crime in Anglo-Saxon England (as attested by the laws in the *Quadripartitus*, Liebermann, 1892).

His eating and drinking, it has been suggested, may have indeed been the most problematic aspects of Grendel because they are what he shares with humans (Magennis, 1999) - his mother, all demon, is never mentioned eating or drinking. The shame is then not Grendel's alleged human father, but the fact that by their eating and drinking, humans are closer to animals than to God – a thought that was surely problematic in the Middle Ages, and that Magennis suggests (*ibid.*) may be at the basis for the OE poets' reticence about food and drink. This, it should be noticed, stands in marked contrast with Old Irish literature – where food and drink, and the consumption thereof, are described in much detail – albeit usually in works that can be interpreted in some aspects as satyrizing the so-called high literature, such as *MacDatho's Pig* (part of the Ulster Cycle), or –in ON- *Thrymskvida* (part of the Poetic Edda).

3. Heroic Ideals and Psychological Anachronism in *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005)

I will briefly explore the missing 25 ways in which this other film deviates from the original poem. Most notably, Gunnarsson's film parallels Zemeckis's in overexplaining motives (1). As the opening titles roll, in the background a medieval-looking map of 'The Northern Seas' serves as background and anchors the action between Geatland (southern Sweden) and Daneland (contemporary Denmark) at the beginning of the sixth century. The film opens on the extended flood-plains of southern Iceland⁹ (2), where the viewers are told that 'A Hate is Born'. A band of warriors headed by the Danish king Hrothgar as a young(er) man kills a giant (3), who has a child that witnesses the event (4). The king spares the child¹⁰, unbeknownst to the other warriors, and the child in turn grows up to be Grendel 'the troll'. In the poem Grendel is not referred to as a troll (4), but he is referred to as *eoten* (ON *jötunn*), i.e. a giant – one cannot but notice the connection between the role of the giants as enemies of the Norse gods, and the connection the Beowulf poem draws between Cain's progeny and all of the chthonic beings of Germanic mythology connected to the natural (as opposed to civilised) world:

- (7) 1. 109 Cain got no good from committing that murder
because the Almighty made him anathema
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants [*eotenas*] too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward. [i.e. the flood]

⁹ Very recognizably so, one cannot but notice the numerous ironic implications of the written statement opening the scene that the action takes place in the 'outskirts of Daneland'.

¹⁰ Children in these contexts are historically never spared to avoid feeding the cycle of revenge (not even the two sons of the last Catholic bishop of Iceland, beheaded with their father Jón Arason in 1550...). This is important for the motivation of Grendel's actions and is possibly a tribute to Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's 'cod-western' film *Hrafninn flýgur* ('When the Raven Flies', 1984), where a similar episode brings about a number of revenge killings when an Irish child spared by a viking raider grows up to find and kill his parents' killers.

Eoten is also related to the root of the English verb ‘to eat’, and Grendel, whose name may literally mean Grinder (of bones), is therefore connected to the ravenous, animal eating of the OE *freten*, rather than the more civilised, human *eten* (see again Magennis 1999 on this point). In the 2005 film, Gunnarsson finds a powerful visual solution to bring home the bestiality of Grendel – though in other ways he stresses the human side too (5). Both Grendel, as his giant father before him, literally ‘sniff out’ their enemies (6). This spares the viewer a considerable amount of blood and gore, which is in the poem and not in this film (7), substituted by a self-flagellating kind of ritual that Grendel operates on himself before he sets out on a killing spree (he hits his head repeatedly with a stone until he bleeds profusely, 8).

In Gunnarsson’s film, Grendel acts in revenge for his father’s killing¹¹ (9), and this is the secret that Hrothgar, broken and depressed because he cannot defend his people as an older man (10), insistently keeps from a particularly inquisitive Beowulf (11): ‘If there is anything you need to tell me, now would be the time’ says the hero, played by a convincing Gerard Butler, in his natural Glaswegian brogue talking to Hrothgar before the night falls.

In the poem, women act their part according to old Germanic custom: the queen completes and supports her husband, an epitome of the civilised Germanic world, but her behaviour is also attuned to the Christian ideal of the poet. Grendel’s mother, however, as the ‘queen’ of the chaotic and natural world of evil beings, acts in perfect accordance with the Germanic idea of revenge as retribution. Beowulf voices the Germanic heroic ideals more than once in the poem, both in his search for glory through action, and while he tries to cheer up Hrothgar who mourns the death of Aeschere, his counsellor, killed by Grendel’s mother:

(8) l. 1384 Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.

This is exactly what Grendel’s mother does: she lashes out against the Danes both in the poem, and in Gunnarsson’s film – regardless of ethnicity or religion. In the 2005 film, in fact, she kills the Irish preacher (12) who has managed to convert a number of Danes (13), among whom also the depressed Hrothgar himself and Unferth, who is an unhappy survivor of Grendel’s first slaughter (14). Far from being saints or whores, women in Gunnarsson’s film are dignified agents. The queen stands by her man, so to speak, and sometimes takes the reins of command (15), other women present at the first banquet are coquettish but not lewd. The queen tells Beowulf that these women are ‘widows... widows far too early’ (16), indicating one more reason why the troll has to be killed¹². The other woman that is prominent in the film is Selma the Witch, who sees how men die (17). She has a son with Grendel (18), who has acted as her protector against the Danes after one carnal encounter with her (19). The Danes, she says, are those ‘who’d fuck me and then cut my throat’. The witch is human, but has supernatural powers of

¹¹ In the poem, Grendel and his mother are literally called ‘fatherless creatures’ (l.1355), to stress their supernatural origins.

¹² Her comments are reminiscent of the saloon owner’s explanation of the many widows victims of the feud between the Baxters and the Rojo families in Sergio Leone’s *For a Fistful of Dollars* (1964).

clairvoyance. She is an intriguing connection between the natural world of magic, of the chthonic beings such as Grendel and his mother (she refuses to live at court), and the so-called civilised world represented by the mead-hall and the social hierarchy of warriors, queen and king.

The most ‘barbaric butchering’ of the poem by Gunnarsson’s film lies undoubtedly in his psychologically sophisticated reading of the king’s and Beowulf’s characters (20). It should be stressed that the masterful performances of Gunnarsson’s four main actors make it difficult to call his version of *Beowulf* a ‘butchering’, which is maintained here only as a tongue-in-cheek misnomer for ‘deviation from the original’ and for balance with the first part of the paper¹³.

Beowulf insists in finding out more about the background of Grendel’s actions (21). Contrarily to the poem, where Grendel is demonic and evil through and through, in Gunnarsson’s film Beowulf is shocked to find that Grendel mimicks and uses a garbled, barely intelligible form of language, understood and translated by Selma the Witch (22). This idea is taken up again in Zemeckis’s film where a similarly simplified, but more intelligible form of OE-like utterances are placed in the pitiful, leper-like mouth of Grendel, who –when trapped- looks more like a disabled, seriously diseased person than a demon, especially when he says ‘ic non demon’ or some such gibberish. He also speaks to his mother in Zemeckis’s film, who chides him unconvincingly for eating humans and not goats or other animals.

In Gunnarsson’s film, this use of language is what shocks Beowulf, since it is what connects Grendel to humans – after all we are the only species capable of using this highly sophisticated system of oral (or visual) symbols for communication. Grendel’s motivation for killing as revenge (23) clears a secure spot in Beowulf’s Germanic system of beliefs: in this film, Grendel spares all who are not Danes, hence his elusiveness in fighting the Geats, who, as Selma explains, have done nothing to him. This is why Hondscio in this film is only killed (and much less barbarously than in the poem, 24) after he has viciously defiled Grendel’s father’s skull (and memory). As we know, defiling a corpse was a punishable offence in Anglo-Saxon Laws (*Quadripartitus*).

Beowulf drinks with measure in this film, the drinking is never underlined (as it behooved OE conventions), except in the drunkenness of the King, which is ascribed to depression in *Beowulf and Grendel*. Lust is never mentioned in this film (except for the Danes that rape Selma repeatedly, with Unferth among them), although sexual desire is expressed by Grendel once when he lays with Selma, and by Beowulf and Selma both, when they are also shown making love, but it is never shown in a lewd or lecherous light.

The 50th way to leave your Beowulf butchered, and the 25th in this film, however, has to be the respect that Beowulf acquires for his dead enemy, Grendel, once he has found out more about his life story and beliefs. Beowulf, in fact, builds a cairn on the beach where Grendel dragged himself to die (brought into his mother’s watery cave by her ghostly hand), and tells Grendel’s son to be proud of his dead father. As a consequence of these actions, the son seems to accept that Beowulf is not to be

¹³ Selma the Witch is a good character but the performance of Sarah Polley pales when compared to Stellan Skarsgård’s as King Hrothgar, Ingvar E. Sigurdsson’s as Grendel, Steinunn Ólína Thorsteinsdóttir’s as Wealhtheow, and Gerard Butler’s as Beowulf.

persecuted as the object of revenge and that his father died an acceptable death, underscored by his mother's obvious fondness for the hero.

The lesson learned in this case seems to be that tolerance is the virtue to be practiced that can break the vicious circle of gratuitous violence and revenge. And this tolerance is contagious: on the ship that takes the warriors back to Geatland, Breca explains to a companion that the bard is comparing Grendel to Cain in his song because Grendel and Cain are both killers: to which his companion retorts 'we all are' and therefore the bard's 'tale is shit.'

4. Conclusions

Let us recapitulate: through drinking and debauchery, Zemeckis's film teaches us that sex only exists as lust and that lust drives all bad human actions, that violence is justified against those that are different from us unless they stay out of our human ways, and that there is no way of breaking the cycle of lust-violence-power-greed-death-revenge.

Drinking in Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* –which is rated R- is shown in moderation and as an essentially convivial activity, just as in the original poem, with the exception of Hrothgar's indulgence in drinking when despairing at his impotence against Grendel's fury. Gunnarsson's film tells us that the marks of a real hero are moderation, tolerance, avoidance of gratuitous violence and trying to understand that those who seem superficially different from us are really not so different after all. Intolerance and lack of understanding are the real cause of many human problems, which can be overcome not by blindly adhering to the old ways (Grendel's mother, Hondscio, Breca), nor illogically converting to a new religion out of despair (Hrothgar and Unferth), but by making an effort to know and understand, as well as through generosity.

Which way of butchering a medieval poem would you rather have? Let's toast to that!

References

- Ambrose, T. "He Is Legend". *Empire*. December 2007, pp. 139–142.
- Cronenberg, D. (director) *Eastern Promises*. Focus features, 2007.
- Earl, J. W. 'The Necessity of Evil in Beowulf.' *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan., 1979), pp. 81-98.
- Fulk, R.D., R. E. Bjork, and J. D. Niles (eds.). *Klaeber's Beowulf*. (4th edition). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- Gunnarsson, S. (director) *Beowulf and Grendel*. DVD version of 2005 film. (With director's comments and interviews to cast and writers).
- Heaney, S. (translator). *Beowulf*. N.Y./London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000.
- Liebermann, F. *Quadripartitus: ein englisches Rechtsbuch von 1114*. Halle: Max Niemeyer.
- Leone, S. (director) *For a Fistful of Dollars*. United Artists, 1964.
- Magennis, H. *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999.
- Magennis, H. *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Medved, M. *Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Shakespeare, W. *Complete Works*. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994.

Vocabulariast, The. 'Beowulf (2007) DVD movie review.' (Saturday, 6th Dec. 2008).
<http://www.moviecynics.com/beowulf-2007-dvd-movie-review/> (3/15/10).
Zemeckis, R. (director) *Beowulf*. DVD version of the 2007 film. (With director's
comments and interviews to cast and writers).