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Looking at the hero:
Beowulf and graphic novels in the 21st Century

A partire dall'inizio degli anni Quaranta del secolo scorso e in particolare dall'inizio del XXI secolo, il poema anglo-sassone Beowulf è stato trasposto in un numero sorprendente di serie e di libri a fumetti. Ognuna di queste riscritture persegue obiettivi specifici, si rivolge a uno specifico pubblico e mette in atto specifiche strategie narrative e semiotiche. Ognuna di queste riscritture va dunque studiata tenendo conto del suo contesto di produzione e di ricezione. L'articolo si propone di tracciare un'ampia panoramica delle diverse strategie adottate da sceneggiatori e disegnatori di fumetti allo scopo di divulgare, reinterpretare o – in qualche caso – sovvertire il poema inglese antico.

In the not so vast panorama of adaptations into comics of medieval literature, *Beowulf* is clearly an exception. Whilst several comic book series and graphic novels are inspired by the world of Icelandic sagas, for example, very few of them can be considered as retellings of a specific source text. Even in the case of the German *Nibelungenlied*, most graphic novel adaptations rework not the original medieval poem, but Richard Wagner's free reworking of all the sources of the Nibelungen legend, thus, what we have before us are often retellings of a retelling.

A very different case is the one of the Old English heroic poem describing the fights of the Geatish hero Beowulf against three powerful antagonists: the anthropomorphic monster Grendel and his mother – both killed by the young hero in the land of the Danes – and the fire-spitting dragon, which Beowulf kills in his old age with the help of the younger warrior Wiglaf. The first and very free adaptation of *Beowulf* into comics was by Enrico Basari and Kurt Caesar and it was published in the Italian comics magazine *Il Vittorioso* during the years 1940-1941. Since then, this Old English poem has been transposed into comics a surprisingly high number of times and, moreover, its popularity in the contemporary popular culture is demonstrated by the several transpositions into other semiotic codes, such as movies, TV series and music, not to mention science fiction and fantasy novels[1]. Such

adaptations, obviously, do not all have the same purpose: some of them – above all some adaptations into comics – apparently intend to be "easier" or more captivating substitutes of the original epos, capable of attracting a younger readership or, in any case, a readership more familiar with contemporary media than with medieval epic poetry. Other adaptations, on the other hand, strongly deviate from the original in plot and/or setting and, hence, have undoubtedly been conceived not as substitutes, but rather as rewrites, sometimes even as subversive rewrites[2]. In any case, all such adaptations *refract* the original text, proposing new versions and new interpretations. In André Lefevere's words:

> canonized works of a certain literature exist in a variety of refractions in the culture in which that literature is embedded, and in other cultures into which the work has been exported. Refraction occurs when a text is produced to replace an original text for a given audience. There are at least two main motives for this activity: to promote the values in which a culture, or an audience (professes to) believe(s), and to make a profit. (Lefevere 1984: 219)[3]

The production of adaptations of *Beowulf* into comics is not particularly impressive until the beginning of the 21st century: besides the Italian version of 1940-1941, we find in the second half of the 20th century the six issues of Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte's comic book series *Beowulf*, published by the DC comics (the publishing house which also issued the mainstream superhero series *Superman* and *Batman*) in the years 1975-76, presenting the Geatish hero as a fantasy warrior modelled on Conan the Barbarian[4]; the very short adaptation of Mike

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[1] For a survey of the adaptations of *Beowulf* in popular culture, see the website *Beowulfiana*: https://www.library.rochester.edu/robbins/beowulfiana. More specifically on filmic transpositions, see Buzzoni (2010), Simbolotti (2010) and Giusti (2011); on fantasy rewrites, see instead Ferrari (2013), and on transpositions into comics, see Gómez Calderón (2007).

[2] On the cultural function of adaptations, Gérard-Denis Farcy points out: "L'adaption remplace moins l'absente qu'elle ne l'interpelle, à titre de référence culturelle par example" (1993: 388).

[3] Lefevere's definition, however, does not consider the cases in which the rewrite's purpose is to put into questions the values inherent to a specific canonized text or the mainstream interpretation of such text.

[4] On Basari and Caesar's *Beowulf:leggenda cristiana dell'antica Danimarca* see Osborn (1997: 351-352), Giusti (2006), and Gómez Calderón (2007: 111-112). Uslan and Villamonte's series is analyzed in Gómez Calderón (2007: 114-118). On this series see also Peter W. Lee's paper *Mirroring the Medieval Modern: DC Comics' Beowulf, Dragon Slayer* (2008).

Gustovich and Mike Gorman, published in the first issue of the comics magazine *The Land of Prester John* in 1977; Jerry Bingham's graphic novel *Beowulf*, published in 1984, which is, indeed, the first attempt at a faithful transposition of the story into comics, and, finally, another Italian retelling of the Old English epic poem: the science fiction comics story *L'uomo venuto dal futuro* ("The man who came from the future") by Luigi Mignacco and Fabrizio Russo, published in the comics magazine *Zona X* in the spring of 1996[5].

The turning point comes with the end of the century and the publication of Gareth Hinds' beautiful graphic novel, first published in three issues in the years 1999-2000 and then reprinted in a single volume entitled *The collected Beowulf*. Gareth Hinds' adaptation is an anomalous but stimulating project in the production of graphic novels. As Jerry Bingham had already done before him, Hinds drops the balloon as typical graphic convention of comics' language and includes the whole of the text in captions. This particular mode of interplay between words and pictures goes back to the dawn of the history of comics and characterizes also Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, a comic strip created in 1937 that exerted a huge influence on the subsequent history of comics. The text, moreover, is not Gareth Hinds' own retelling of Beowulf's story, but consists of excerpts from Francis Gummere's prose translation of the Old English poem, first published in 1910. In this way, words and pictures build up two parallel narratives, which comment on and explain each other by combining the two semiotic codes without trespassing each other's graphic borderline. The graphic novel, as a hybrid text, is thus composed of an archaizing (but understandable) word-text and of a remarkably powerful and accurate sequence of pictures, capable of creating in the reader a sense of temporal distance but, at the same time, a sense of involvement and of narrative urgency[6].

At least a further thirteen adaptations of *Beowulf* into comics have been published since Gareth Hinds' graphic novel, each of them pursuing a specific artistic and pragmatic project. As to the strategies of adaptation, we can make a first broad distinction between those comics

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[5] On Jerry Bingham's *Beowulf* see Ferrari (2004: 57-58) and Gómez Calderón (2007: 118-120). A concise analysis of Mignacco and Russo's *L'uomo venuto dal futuro* is presented in Ferrari (2004: 70-71).
[6] On Gareth Hinds' *Beowulf,* see: Cera et al. (2002), Ferrari (2004: 57-60), Gómez Calderón (2007: 120-121).

stories which we can define as free retellings of the Old English poem and those which – although with some reservation – we can consider as intersemiotic translations. The problem with such definition derives from the fact that, obviously, a poem and a comics story provide their readers with different semantic information. As the great comics artist Will Eisner points out:

> In writing with words alone, the author directs the reader's imagination. In comics the imagining is done for the reader. An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are 'mixed' the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages. (Eisner 1985: 122)

Though the concept of 'intersemiotic translation' may be a controversial one and there is no consensus in the scholarly debate about its pertinence with regard to comics or film adaptations[7], one cannot deny that there is a basic difference between those adaptations which more or less faithfully follow the plot of the source text and introduce the reader into its fictional world, and those adaptations which, in contrast, radically change the plot or set the story in a different diegetic universe.

Examples belonging to this latter group are graphic novels such as David Hutchison's *Beowulf* (2008), where the protagonist is a ninja mercenary who, in a post-apocalyptic fictional world, fights against an artificial demon named Grendel[8]; or Brian Augustyn's comic book series *Beowulf: Gods and Monsters* (2005-2006), where the ancient Geatish hero has survived until our days, lives in Manhattan and has the task of defending humanity from an impending, undefined catastrophe to come[9]. Also the episode *Grendel!* of the Italian series *Martin Mystére* may be considered as

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[7] The concept of intersemiotic translation was introduced into translation studies by Roman Jakobson in his seminal 1959 essay *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* (Jakobson 1966-1988: II, 260-266). Umberto Eco (2003: 315-344) argued against the very possibility of an intersemiotic translation. In his opinion, the difference in the expression substance implies a difference in the information, the transferred text must thus be considered as an interpretation rather than a translation of the source text. Different opinions, however, are expressed by another Italian semiologist, Nicola Dusi, in his studies on intersemiotic translations (2000 and 2003).

[8] David Hutchison's story was first published in a series of three comic books in 2006 and then reissued in a single volume in 2008.

[9] On Brian Augustyn's series, see Gómez Calderón (2007: 125-127).

belonging to this group of stories[10]. In this episode, the hero of the series, the "detective of the impossible" Martin Mystère, enters another, timeless dimension and kills Grendel and his mother. In order to explain the context behind the story narrated in the episode, the protagonist himself summarises the first part of *Beowulf*, whilst the pictures of the cartoonist construct quite a conventional image of the Scandinavian pre-Christian world. Finally, a twelve year old Beowulf and his twin brother Grendel are the heroes of a series of three graphic novels published between 2008 and 2012 by Alexis E. Fajardo. Just as in the case of Uslan and Villamonte's series, here as well the protagonist meets legendary figures of the European epic traditions, such as Roland and El Cid. Fajardo's books, however, are apparently intended for a children's readership.

With regard to the group of "intersemiotic translations", a second distinction should be drawn between those adaptations which are more or less explicitly didactic in purpose, and those which clearly aim at entertainment or at an artistic effect. The didactic intent is already evident in the paratext of Jacqueline Morley and Li Sidong's *Beowulf*, published in 2010: eight pages of comment follow the story, informing the reader about the context of composition of the Old English poem, its reception and the main features of Old Germanic civilization. Furthermore, several footnotes explain culture-bound terms as well as less common English words such as *uncannily* or *kinsman*.

A didactic intent is evident also in the case of Paul D. Storrie and Ron Randall's *Beowulf Monster Slayer – A British Legend* (2009), a graphic novel which belongs to a series of adaptations of myths and legends from throughout the world into comics. The book opens with a short introduction presenting the Old English poem and subtly referring to the role it played in the composition of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, thus appealing to the popularity of this fantasy novel among the intended readership:

> In modern times, *Beowulf* has become an important window into the Anglo-Saxon world. Many scholars have studied the poem, including JRR Tolkien. Tolkien was so influenced by *Beowulf* that he used parts of it in his series of novels that includes *The Lord of the Rings*.

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[10] The episode was published in the issue of December 2006 / January 2007, it was written by Carlo Recagno and drawn by Esposito bros.

The graphic representation of the hero, however, implicitly evokes a comparison with another figure of the Old Germanic tradition which, since the Sixties, has also become a hero of comics and popular culture in general: The Mighty Thor. The book closes with a glossary, some reading guidelines and information about the authors and the sources they used in order to create the graphic novel. It is worth noting that the introduction as well as the final comments call attention to the collaboration of an academic consultant, professor Andrew Scheil of the University of Minnesota, who thus warrants that the translation into a graphic narrative is correct.

Two other adaptations of the poem, both published in 2007, seem to have a different intent. *Beowulf: The Graphic Novel* by Stephen L. Stern, Christopher Steininger and Chris Studabaker is a black and white retelling of the poem which partly reshapes the plot by giving a key role to the character of the spiteful Danish *þyle* (King's spokesman) Unferth. In his introduction to the graphic novel, also the writer Stephen L. Stern emphasizes the relationship between *Beowulf* and Tolkien's works:

> Simply put, Midgard – the realm of the humans in Norse mythology – is mentioned no less than six times in the epic poem that Tolkien so assiduously studied and was so obviously influenced by, not only in terms of his settings, but in terms of the archetypes he would employ. It can confidently be said that, without *Beowulf*, there would be no *Lord of the Rings*. And it is just as true to say that *Beowulf* was the first true champion of Middle Earth.

Stern explains, moreover, that his and Steininger's purpose was "to remain as faithful as possible to the original as the graphic novel form allows". Nevertheless, the plot and the world of the graphic novel are quite different from the ones of the Old English poem: as mentioned above, not only does Unferth play a much more important role here as the accomplice of Grendel's mother, but some details – such as the naked dancers at Hrothgar's court or the bizarre shape of thrones and crowns – evoke more the fantasy world of Frank Frazetta's *Conan* than a 6th century Scandinavian medieval setting.

Beowulf: The World's First and Greatest Hero (2007) by Stefan Petrucha and Kody Chamberlain is more faithful to the plot of the source text. The

book has no introduction nor appendices and, besides the presentation of the authors on the inside back cover, only some generic information about the poem is provided on the back cover. Also in this case, the interest of the potential reader is stimulated by a reference to Tolkien:

> Written more than a thousand years ago, BEOWULF is the first epic work in English. A timeless tale of heroism in the face of a wild and unknowable evil, the story of Beowulf has been the inspiration for many other tales, from J.R.R. Tolkien to modern fantastic films.

Even though the plot follows the source quite faithfully, the dialogues and the graphic presentation of the characters and of the setting considerably change the overall meaning of the story: except for the depiction of the Viking ships, no reference is made to typical Scandinavian or – more in general – Old Germanic culture, and this, together with the recurrent mention of God and the *Wyrd* (the Anglo-Saxon word for *destiny*)[11], creates the impression of an abstract heroic culture of the past, vaguely connected with the history and civilization of Northern Europe but not identical with a specific area in a specific time. Moreover, Beowulf is presented right at the beginning of the story as an adult and a famous warrior and this means that his fights against Grendel and his mother are deprived of their aspect of initiation into adulthood and heroism.

In the remaining part of this article I shall focus on the two – at least to my knowledge – most recent adaptations into comics of the poem: the Spanish graphic novel *Beowulf*, by Santiago García and David Rubín, and *The Beast of Wolfe's Bay*, by Erik Evensen, both published in 2013. A comparison between these two adaptations seems to me all the more interesting as the two books follow strategies of retelling which are in many ways the opposite of each other.

In a post published on 31st December 2012 on his blog "Mandorla", Santiago García talks about how he aimed at creating a graphic novel about Beowulf from the very beginning of his career as a comics writer, in 2002. *Beowulf*, says García, "en 2002 era una historia que me había acompañado toda mi vida" ("was in 2002 a story which had followed me all my life")[12]. His partner as artist was then the already well-known Javier

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[11] For an introductory analysis of the concept of *wyrd* see Branston (1957: 57-71).
[12] http://santiagogarciablog.blogspot.it/2013/02/beowulf-vive.html (last retrieved in May 2017).

Olivares, and together they worked for ten years without succeeding in completing the project: only 22 of the 72 planned pages, in fact, were ready in 2012. Subsequently – as Olivares himself says in an afterword he wrote for his friend's book – García started a collaboration with the artist David Rubín and a much longer graphic novel, consisting of 200 large pages, was finally published.

Besides being a comics writer, García is also a scholar in the field of comics studies, and his graphic novel shows a great awareness of the expressive resources of the medium. Already at the beginning of the book, the authors take advantage of such resources by superimposing two different time levels, with the effect of a powerful emotional impact: whilst the smaller, isolated boxes represent the cheerfulness at Hrothgar's court at the peak of the king's glory in a series of close-ups of the king as well as of his warriors, the underlying double-page spread shows with brutal realism the death and desperation after Grendel's first assault on the royal hall. More in general, the frequent combination of double-page spreads and small, superimposed or juxtaposed panels allows the authors to give strong emphasis to an action and, at the same time, to show the emotional reactions of the characters portrayed in close-ups or, in other cases, to point out some significant details of the scene which strengthen the overall dramatic effect. This technique slows down the rhythm of the reading and compels the reader to stop at the page and decode the interplay of images and words. The same activation of the reader's inferential skills is also obtained by putting into sequence seemingly non-connected panels, which only later are ordered into a meaningful scene. This is the technique used, for example, at the first appearance of Grendel: a double-page spread is divided into four long panels, each representing a particular of the scene, and only the subsequent double-page spread shows the whole figure of the monster against the background of the forest in the night.

Also the peculiar use of colours greatly contributes to the overall aesthetic effect of the graphic novel and to its meaning. Each episode has its own predominant colour which helps to create the emotional atmosphere of the narrative segment: so, for example, the white of the snow dominates the scene of the Geats's arrival in Denmark, thus producing a sense of cold, whilst green dominates the scene of Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother in the depths of the horrible lake where she dwells, thus emphasizing the underwater setting. The colour which

dominates the whole graphic novel, however, is without doubt the red one. As the colour of blood, red symbolizes the violence and the brutality of the fight against the monsters, and also of human wars: red is therefore also the background of several panels which illustrate the flashback narrative in which Beowulf tells the story of the war between Geats and Swedes and how he became the new king of the Geats.

Whilst García and Rubín have put a lot of work into composition and framing, thereby achieving outstanding artistic results, they have made just a few changes in the plot and in the depiction of the characters. The most notable changes the authors have made to the story have to do with the figures of the malevolent Unferth and of the young Wiglaf, Beowulf's relative and companion in his last fight against the dragon. In contrast to the source text and to the whole tradition of retellings, Unferth is depicted here not as a spiteful councillor of King Hrothgar, but as an arrogant kid, much younger than the hero. Beowulf's harshness towards him appears therefore quite surprising, casting a shadow of brutality on the hero himself.

Beowulf reveals an unpleasant side to his character also in his relationship with the younger Wiglaf, who is portrayed here, quite anachronistically, as a sort of cleric, an intellectual who has grown up at the Geatish court. Before the fight against the dragon, Beowulf treats him almost with patronizing contempt, and it is only during the fight, as Wiglaf gives proof of his courage by remaining by his side when all other warriors run away from the frightful monster, that he changes his attitude towards him.

Finally, some attention is due also to the conclusion of the graphic novel: here we find again an interplay of different codes and an overlapping of different time levels. A sequence of panels, on the higher part of the pages, represents Wiglaf reproaching the Geatish warriors for their cowardice and prophesizing the end of the Geatish kingdom; on the lower part of the pages, instead, Beowulf's funeral is depicted, and through these panels runs the text of the poem in Old English, thus symbolizing the transformation of heroic deeds into oral tradition and epic poetry. After an all-black double-page spread, modern transcriptions of the Old English text and the front cover of the graphic novel itself are finally depicted in panels, thereby representing the chain of transcriptions, editions and retellings, and its provisional conclusion.

As mentioned above, a totally different strategy of adaptation is carried out by the graphic novelist Erik Evensen in his book *The Beast of Wolfe's Bay*. Evensen, who is also assistant professor of design at the University of Wisconsin Stout, explains his method and his purpose in the *Closing notes* to the book:

> I decided to take a modern approach that changed up a lot of the original dynamics of the Beowulf story, deconstructing them and stripping them of a lot of their more operatic nature. Beowulf of the Waegmundings was no longer a burly, larger-than-life hero. Instead he became the nerdy Brian Wegman, the unlikeliest of heroes. Hrothgar was no longer a king plagued by monstrous attacks; instead, he became Gary Roth, sheriff of a community plagued by unexplainable happenings.

The diegetic world of the graphic novel is therefore radically different from that of the Old English poem and is clearly inspired – as the author himself declares in the *notes* – by such adaptations as Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead*, its filmic transposition *The Thirteenth Warrior* and the Canadian-Icelandic film *Beowulf and Grendel*. As in these versions of the legend, Grendel is not an evil descendant of the biblical Cain, as in the medieval heroic poem, but the survivor of an ancient, mythical hominid species known in popular culture as big-foot or sasquatch. The fact that the main characters – the "perpetual grad student" Brian Wegman and the female counterpart to Wiglaf, the college teacher Winifred Roth – are academic nerds imbued with pop culture, who live and act in a campus in the present-day United States produces a comic effect and drastically changes the overall meaning of the story.

This thorough reshaping of the plot and of the setting goes, however, hand in hand with a quite traditional graphic organization: we do not find here any inventive graphic solution comparable to the ones in García and Rubín's work, the page is organized in panels of different shapes, but perfectly distinct from each other, and never overlap; furthermore there are no double-page spreads and no splash pages. This makes the interpretation of the text particularly easy and confers a regular rhythm to the act of reading, without noteworthy differences in timing.

To conclude: thirteen adaptations into comics of Beowulf in the last fifteen years, not including quotations and cameos, is a surprising and

interesting fact which reveals quite a lot about the vitality of the Old English poem in contemporary popular culture, and which poses a number of questions about the dialogue between post-modernity and pre-modernity, questions which are worth investigating and which require a number of different specialist skills. There is much to do for the philologist as well as for the visual critic, the social scientist, the expert in comics studies and many others.

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