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## “The Dolphin Slayer”: A close look at Vallve’s *Beowulf* (1933)

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### *Abstract*

Scholarship focusing on adaptations of *Beowulf* for children has thrived in the last decade including the publication of anthologies, bibliographies and academic monographs (e.g., *Beowulf as Children’s Literature*, 2021). In the case of Spanish adaptations of *Beowulf* for children, the work of Olivares Merino (2009) and María José Gómez-Calderón (2012), amongst others, have contributed to a better understanding of the earliest attempts to adapt the Old English poem.

The present paper aims to offer a close examination of Vallvé and Myrbach’s 1933 *Beowulf*, the first ever version of the poem in Spanish. A prose adaptation for young readers of the “famous epic poem from 700 AD”, claimed by the author to be based on “the manuscript kept at the British Museum”, Vallvé’s retelling includes a number of departures from the Old English text that are worth exploring. The modifications introduced when narrating *Beowulf*’s swimming contest with Brecca, the depiction of Heorot and the Danish court, “the boxing match” with Grendel, the treatment given to the supernatural or the devices used to create suspense will be considered against the wider context for the publication of this adaptation of the poem and Vallvé’s career adapting and writing for a number of audiences.

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Slide 1:

Last year in La Rioja's SELIM, for those of you who were there, I talked about Beowulf in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early twentieth century Spanish publications, looking at the historical press and literary magazines, something that to my knowledge had not been done before and on which I continue to work. This year, almost as a continuation of the journey that started there, I wish to offer a close examination of the first version of the poem in Spanish, Manuel Vallvé's 1933 adaptation for young readers, which has received some scholarly attention, but rarely a detailed examination of the context for its publication or of the decisions made when adapting the poem and how those compare to the Old English source.

Children adaptations of Beowulf are the most popular versions of the poem outside translations into modern languages and so, it should not surprise us that the first version of Beowulf available to readers in Spanish was precisely that. In order to contextualise where Vallvé's retelling sits within pioneering contributions to Old English studies in Spanish, we can take a look at the following slide. + Explain [slide 2]

Slide 3 - Araluce y obras maestras

So, to fully understand why this very nice looking volume was made available to Spanish readers in 1933 we need to tell the story [no doubt abridged] of the publisher that made this possible.

Ramón de San Nicolás Araluce, born in 1865, was the son of an aristocratic family from Santander in Northern Spain (his parents were marquesses) a family he soon left as a young man for Mexico where he would start working at the *editorial de Juan de la Fuente Parres*, that he would end up owning. At the turn of the century, most likely in 1898, he returns to Spain, and having married a Catalan woman he founds his own publishing house "Casa editorial Araluce" in Barcelona becoming a very active figure in the literary life of early twentieth century Catalonia.

It is in 1914 that the series known as "las obras maestras al alcance de los niños" (Masterpieces/The great classics for children) had its first volume published.

They were soon to reach immense popularity as they became part of the *bibliotecas circulantes* (circulating libraries that allowed books to be borrowed), the book catalogue of many schools both in urban, and more significantly, perhaps, rural Spain and also part of the *bibliotecas itinerantes* (travelling libraries) during the second republic. Also as Teresa Julio has pointed out these books became key in literacy programmes serving the purpose of



educating the peasantry, both children and adults in many latinamerican countries, Colombia for instance, which was a very lucrative initiative for Araluce.

The idea behind “ obras maestras” comes from Araluce’s realization that there was a market for this type of versions of universal classics adapted for children to be published in Spanish following the success of similar models in England. Mary and Charles Lamb’s adaptations of Shakespeare can be seen as inspiration [the first volume of Obras Maestras is a collection of Shakespearean stories], but the obvious initial source [and I will explain why I am using this word] for Araluce was the work of authors such as Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, Mary McGregor or Jennie Lang who, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century had adapted many Classics of World literature for a young readership in England. Among the most important publishers in London was T.C. & E.C. Jack for which, Marshall adapted, among others Beowulf in 1908 (Stories of Beowulf Told to children). So, the reason I was saying source before, is because the first 8 volumes of “obras maestras” were not Spanish versions of Classics but direct translations of English versions by Marshall and Mac Gregor. However, it does not take Araluce long to realise that he needs a team of writers and illustrators that can offer Spanish retellings of classics for young readers without the need of mediation via English translation. After an ninth and tenth volume dedicated to El Quijote, the series would grow to reach an overall number of around 100 versions of classics coming from all around the globe and, historically, from a wide range of periods. Among the most prolific writers adapting classics for La biblioteca Araluce were the Galician María Luz Morales and the Catalan M. Vallvé.

Slide 4 – M. Vallvé

Vallvé started working on the field of literature for children and young readers in the 1920s and continued his fruitful career as translator and writer of fiction for several decades.

Here you can see some of his contributions to Obras maestras and other similar series in Araluce, such as those that were part of páginas brillantes. The tandem Vallvé as writer and José Segrelles as illustrator [ a symbolist and one of the most influential ilustrators of the first half of the century in Spain] produced very interesting volumes with medieval narratives as sources such as “Los caballeros de la table redonda!, but the reason that I am singling out these two volumes down here (Los Vikings and Más historias de Wagner) is because Vallvé’s adaptations are illustrated by the Austrian Felician (de/von) Myrbach, the same artistic collaboration we find in Beowulf. [Happy to tell you more about him but I don’t think I will have the time]

Slide 5- Vallvé

It is, perhaps, worth noting that Vallvé , in the 1940 s and 50s , would also publish a number of illustrated popular novels under several pen names, and would also contribute to the Magazine Fantasía with a number of short stories. Also, as mentioned earlier he translates



regularly from both English and French into Spanish and, in one single occasion, into Catalan, Lawrence Stern's *A sentimental journey*.

#### Slide 6- Beowulf 1933

So now that we know a bit more about Araluce and Vallvé, we can proceed to discuss, in the time remaining, the 1933 *Beowulf*, which is the 81<sup>st</sup> volume in *Obras maestras*, clearly it was not the obvious choice.

#### Scholarship:

In this prose adaptation of the poem, Vallvé is clearly working from a modern English translation of *Beowulf*, but, unfortunately, I have not been able to identify which one yet (although there are a couple of obvious suspects). Olivares Merino who, to my knowledge, has offered the most detailed examination of Vallvé's version to date, rightly notes that in the four page prologue, Vallvé shows awareness, and is concerned, with the "mythical allegory" school of criticism, which although already falling out of favour by the 1930's shows the author's familiarity with some scholarship on the poem. Olivares, who mistakenly dates the adaptation to 1934, disagrees with Marijane **Osborn's interpretation of Vallvé's *Beowulf* in which she sees modifications aimed at emphasizing the moral content** whilst Olivares believes this *Beowulf* is "no way moralizing, the author is clearly adopting a traditional view in which 'goodies' defeat the 'baddies' and the former are presented as Christians. More interestingly, Olivares cannot fail to notice how, despite I must say Vallvé's defense of fantasy in the prologue, his version in fact rationalizes much of what we today perceive as puzzling. Olivares' analysis though stops there and no further exploration of individual passages within Vallvé's version are discussed. So In the last section of this paper, I wish to to analyse some interesting departures from his source (whichever modern English translation that might be) as well as some creative approaches Vallvé took while preserving the main storyline of the poem and removing the digressions as it was and still is common in *Beowulfian* adaptations.

Due to time limitations I have chosen three:

- The swimming context and the sea monsters
- The boxing match against Grendel
- *Beowulf's* judgement

[slide 7]

Vallvé's *Beowulf*, whis is divided into seven chapters, begins with the hero's sea journey to Denmark and an extended account of the swimming contest with Breca who, in this retelling, is one of the hero's companions in the ship. Interestingly enough this chapter ends in a cliff hanger which Vallvé's uses effectively to create suspense, no doubt, a very *Beowulfian* feature. The hero dives and disappears from Brecca's sight who when trying to find him, has



to “make a considerable effort not to yell in terror at the scene before his eyes”. And so the chapter ends and Vallvé takes to Heorot, leaving the reader eager to know what has happened to Beowulf and his fellow warrior and creating a rather interlacing structure in the initial chapters of his version. When we eventually get to the beginning of chapter 3 the truth is revealed and we find Beowulf fighting a giant Octopus. Interestingly enough in this very elaborate retelling of the swimming competition, Beowulf does not encounter a number of mighty sea beasts, but 3 well defined animals who he kills in succession, rationalising the fantastic, but also anticipating the poem’s three monster fights.

[slide 8]

Alongside the octopus Beowulf defeats a swordfish and a Dolphin who he, with a smile, catches under his left arm and hugs against his chest to death (not sure this would make it into a children’s adaptation today)

I am conscious of time, so I will move on to my second chosen passage. Beowulf does not quite wrestle Grendel who is constantly described in animal [sometimes human] terms, who is demonic but no descendant of Cain’s kin, but they engage in what clearly reads as a boxing match: Beowulf throws a first punch to the monster’s head which could have knocked down an ox, then a second and a third to Grendel’s breastbone and then dances around him (Mohamed Ali like) whilst Grendel is trying to grab him. Finally, and this alongside the illustration is my favourite bit, we read how, due to the constant punches Beowulf is landing, one of the monster’s eyes is shut completely and the other is half way there, there is an eyebrow laceration, a broken upper lip, and two or three broken teeth. Rationalization we have, but at a time when creative approaches in Beowulfian adaptations for children were starting to appear (see 1933 Strafford Riggs *The story of Beowulf*, which starts with an account of Beowulf’s childhood) this to me ranks quite high.

[Slide 9]

Finally, I will briefly discuss Vallvé’s judgement of the hero. Unlike some versions for children who do not include the death of Beowulf (I am thinking of Tolkien’s creative reconstruction in *Sellic Spell* and its eucatastrophe) Vallvé’s hero travels for two days from the capital of his kingdom and through a wasteland, resulting from the dragon’s attacks, unaddressed while the king was persuaded by friends and wife not to fight the monster, to eventually locate the Dragon’s dwelling and give death to the last adversary with the help of Wiglaf. In my view the most interesting aspect of this final section of Vallvé’s adaptation can be found in Beowulf’s last words [see Heaney’s translation 2730].



In Vallvé's adaptation, it is worth noting the lay sung by [Hrothgar's scop](#) in Heorot is not that of the Finnesburgh episode, but in another creative departure from his source, we hear about Scyld Sceafig, a narrative of origins about what being a good king means, and that is certainly easier to digest for young readers as a small digression there and not as a decontextualised opening to the story. Vallvé's focus on kingship and being a good ruler to one's people can be further explored by looking at Beowulf's final words. The dying king asks Wiglaf to kneel and in an anachronistic way taps him in the shoulder with his sword electing him as his successor. Most tellingly though, Beowulf, does not command Wiglaf to seek the dragon's treasure, quite the opposite, when Wiglaf disappears and comes back with some gold, Beowulf, far from finding consolation in beholding the treasure he will leave to his people he is the one who lets his closest companion know that this will be useless and that it must be buried alongside the chamber with his ashes in the barrow he asks to be built. Leer en español "If the treasure were to be left in the hands of men it would be the cause of endless deaths and great misfortunes" says Beowulf right before his very final intervention in which he asks Wiglaf to be "a good king". Beowulf seems to be depicted as fully righteous (moralising?), but I will leave you with a final thought – considering ideology is always lurking behind children's adaptations when considered in their historical context, one may be tempted to think that the publication of Beowulf in 1933, during Spain's second republic may not be simply a coincidence?

*. In fact, Vallvé suggests that Beowulf is especially suitable for young readers since, like all the works written during the Middle Ages, it is full of charming ingenuity. Humanity, he goes on, was in its childhood, not in the preposterous youth of our days, so cool and materialistic (Vallvé 1934: x).*



Notes:

Grendel's mother in 1933 "The story of Beowulf": 'the most loathsome hag' (55)

"the snakes of the monster-mother's hair hissed at him" (58)

"great claw- fingers", "the monster"

1933: the year of the first Book Fair (feria del Libro) en Madrid

Bjorn as Unferth?