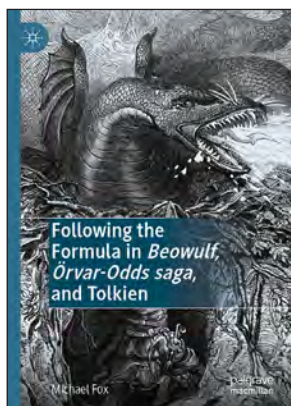


Приказ

Formula: A Story of a Journey

Michael Fox. *Following the Formula in Beowulf, Örvvar-Odds saga, and Tolkien*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 250 pages



The book *Following the Formula in Beowulf, Örvvar-Odds saga, and Tolkien* by Prof. Michael Fox is a comparative study which attempts at offering a new glance at the old question of oral-formulaicity of the Old English epic in conjunction with *Örvvar-Odds saga* and Tolkien's works *Sellic Spell* and *The Hobbit*. This journey is divided into six chapters, each one of them addressing a very specific aspect of this question. Namely, Fox's main idea is that formula understood in a more encompassing way than the initial Parry-Lord definition can be seen as the matrix based on which this traditional epic was formed, but that it also served quite well as the blueprint to J. R. R. Tolkien in his creation of the fairy tale and the book which seem to be perhaps the closest resemblances of *Beowulf* in literary fiction. Having given an overview of the oral-formulaic thought in folkloristic scholarship, Fox continues his first chapter entitled "*Beowulf* and Formula" by addressing the specific instances of oral-formulaic theory which can be detected in *Beowulf*: action-pattern, type-scenes, themes, motifs (with an overview of the problem of their overlapping and resistance to strict classification), structural repetition (the instances of "envelope pattern" and ring pattern proposed by John D. Niles and Ward Parks which could be found in the epic), and finally, the story-pattern as defined by Lord who discovered two basic patterns of story with the roots in the Indo-European tradition, one of them being "The Bear's Son Tale" which is precisely the fairy-tale foundation of *Beowulf* (as confirmed by Andy Orchard and Christine Rauer). Fox goes on to conclude it is the patchwork that is *Beowulf* that rests on the original which shines through the pieces laid on top of it.

Referring to a very rich critical thought in the field of half-line formulas in *Beowulf*, Fox continues his journey by analyzing the *weox under wolcnum* (8a) formula (below the heavens/clouds). This formula, or system as some

scholars refer to it, features not just in *Beowulf* but also in *Andreas*, *Guthlac B*, and in the Christian poem *The Dream of the Rood*. The meaning that it conveys is that of doom and terror that is to come, a change for the worse which is about to take place. It is assumed that this formula was lent to the mentioned Christian poems directly or indirectly from *Beowulf* and other Old English poems. However, this formula has its roots in an older tradition and they can be found in the Old Saxon *uuânum under uuolcnum* formula, which shares a very similar lexical make-up with the aforementioned formula, but the meaning is quite different. Unlike the negative meaning of terror or darkness that descends upon everything after a significant event, the meaning of the older counterpart is positive – it is the light that is emphasized and it connotes good, leaving the author of this book under the impression that the change took place at some point during the transmission of the formula from the old to the newer tradition, although it happened within the boundaries of the same tradition.

Along the same lines, even though extended to the level of a fitt, Fitt 1 of *Beowulf* in which Hrothgar is described as the ruler of the Danes and is to fall victim to Grendel who is a serpent/devil figure marauding the halls of Heorot can be interpreted as the formula whose parallels can be found in *Genesis*. In the chapter entitled “The Fitt Formula: Genesis and Fitt 1,” Fox investigates and establishes the connections between these two works of art, interpreting Hrothgar as a God-like figure, Heorot as similar to the Tower of Babel, and Grendel as the anticipated serpent monster. All of this speaks in favor of the theory that accepting Christian God was one of the momentous tasks of the Anglo-Saxons – the converted audience knew something that the Danes had not known, and that was the reason why they had disappeared in that form.

After the fitt formula, the next stop on the journey of discovering and confirming the oral-formulaic nature of *Beowulf* is “The Digressive Formula: The Sigemund-Heremod Digression.” A possible reason why these two characters were introduced from Icelandic sagas in the form of a digression into this poem is to elevate *Beowulf* to the level of Germanic heroes whose deeds were worth relating, but they were slightly modified. Sigemund, as *Beowulf*’s predecessor, is represented as the hero who slays the dragon while in the Icelandic saga, he is not a dragon-slayer, thus offering a better ground for *Beowulf*’s deeds to come. Heremod is the example of a champion who “lost his fame when his prowess and courage somehow died” (104). Having presented the digression in its entirety, Fox analyzes the connections on the lexical level which exist within the digression itself, with other digressions, and with other Old English texts confirming the existence of the envelope pattern of the whole digression. Interestingly, the same verb (*purhwadan*) is

used for all the three of them to express “the piercing of Sigemund’s dragon (890b), Beowulf’s slash at the neck of Grendel’s mother (1567b), and [...] the invasion of sin into Heremod” (119), while the bright treasure of Sigemund, Beowulf, and Wiglaf establishes the thematic unity of these three heroes. In the words of the author of the book, all of these little steps that the poet takes provoke the constant rethinking of the past in the audience through the links of associations. Another striking phrase is *under harne stan* (under hoar stone) which appears four times in *Beowulf* and all of the instances are related to the abodes of monsters. However, Fox notices that it is this phrase in particular that connects *Beowulf* to Blickling Homily XVI, and consequently to *Visio Pauli* in which is the story about St. Michael: the *draco ingenus* can be connected to the dragons (but also Grendel and his mother) that Sigemund and Beowulf have to fight, thus establishing a link between the two of them and St. Michael. Based on the further analysis of Anglo-Saxon charters and the occurrences of *har stan* in them, Michael Fox purports that the dating of *Beowulf*, which has traditionally been the 10th century, in the time of the rule of King Æthelstan when these charters were made, could be confirmed by its appearance in the charters depicting a very local setting.

On the level of a folk tale belonging to the same tradition, Michael Fox discovers the shared formula in *Örvar-Odds saga* and he elaborates on it in detail in the chapter “The Folktale Formula: *Beowulf* and *Örvar-Odds saga*.” The testaments of the popularity of *Örvar-Odds* are the numerous remaining versions of the story of this hero, but the AB version is the longest one and the one in which all the five fights feature. Fox sheds light on the resemblances which the two heroes share, some of them being their similar childhoods (they are not connected to their families), the fact that they are both “noble heathens,” (169) their bear origins (Beowulf can be interpreted as “bee-wolf” standing for bear), and they are both asked the same question for the sake of establishing their respective identities (“Are you that Oddr who went to Bjarmaland?”; “Are you the Beowulf who contested with Breca, competed at swimming on the broad sea?”). Their opponents share the same not-quite-human quality: Grendel and his mother on the one hand, and Ögmundr on the other. Although the story in *Örvar-Odds saga* is much more complex and features two more fights which are non-existent in *Beowulf*, there are some quite conspicuous similarities between Grendel and Ögmundr. They are both non-human, indescribable monsters, shape-shifters; they both have unusual mothers (Ögmundr’s mother is some kind of ogress or witch), who have to be fought against very hard in order to be vanquished. Oddr kills Ögmundr’s son in the final battle, but Ögmundr himself flees and even rewards Oddr who never gets home because a snake crawls out from the skull of his horse and kills him, thus fulfilling a prophecy. However different they seem to be, these

two narratives have “The Bear’s Son Tale” at their core, with the variations which were probably influenced by the setting, the community, the mindset of the people, but *Beowulf* and *Örvar-Odds saga* stand as the two examples of this “folktale formula” of the same tradition.

So far, the author of the book has not moved much from the supposed oral tradition of the Germanic peoples and has quite successfully showed that one can claim that they belong to an oral tradition in which formulas of different kinds proliferated, enabling the singers to make new and new songs based on the original blueprint. In the final chapter entitled “The Formula Reformulated: *Sellic Spell* and *The Hobbit*,” Michael Fox proposes that as an ardent reader of Old English epic poetry, Tolkien himself recognized the pattern (which was not called formula at that time) and employed it in his making of *Sellic Spell*, and in particular *The Hobbit*. Tolkien wrote *Sellic Spell* as a retelling of *Beowulf* with the episodes and digressions neatly tucked into a linear narrative which strives to explain the not-so-clear parts of *Beowulf*, offering Tolkien’s interpretation of the epic and showing in a way that all the potentially obscure parts of the poem might be a pure consequence of the condensation of the original fairy tale (namely, ATU 301 “The Bear’s Son Tale”). *The Hobbit* is a perfect example of Tolkien’s recognition of the formula – he managed to extract the essence of the *Beowulf* epic-making and to build a new story with the existing analogues. The parallels are numerous: the bewitching nature of Arkenstone and the *eorclanstan* which Hygelac has in his necklace during the “ill-fated Frisian raid” (206); *har stan* turning into the “grey stone” which guards the entrance to the mountain is mentioned precisely four times as in *Beowulf*; the envelope pattern dispersed throughout the novel; trebling as the characteristic of both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*; *The Hobbit* features three main fights, but it actually has a bipartite structure; on the level of themes and motifs, Fox singles out *the beast of battle* to which Tolkien assigns new roles, the *ubi sunt* motif which is quite frequent in Old English poetry in general, and in *Beowulf* in particular; the digressions and episodes are missing from *The Hobbit*, but it is the constant hinting at the other tales which are not told that gives the story the aura of belonging to a much wider history percolating in the background. It is with this particular point, to Fox’s mind, that Tolkien comes closest to the oral poetry-making practice: he manages to suggest the diachrony of the tale being told, just like the best oral poets of the past, and that is, according to John Miles Foley, one of the greatest characteristics of tradition.

At the level of the traditional story-pattern (ATU 301), the similarity of these two works of art shines almost the brightest. Bilbo is an unpromising hero, just like Beowulf in his youth, he is of fairy/human origins, he possesses some unusual abilities, although not the prowess of the aforementioned

hero; Thorin is similar to Beowulf who dies in the final battle. Most interestingly, the words which Gandalf utters with respect to Bilbo's achieving such a magnificent success are similar to the words uttered before the first attack of Grendel: just like God governs the race of men and has the knowledge of everything that should happen in a certain way, so Bilbo's lucky adventures and escapes belong to the wider plan, to some greater pattern of which Bilbo is just an infinitesimal part. Like a magnificent teller of tales, Tolkien manages to tell a new story based on the pattern which he has scrutinized so studiously that it has provided him with the sketch of his own story. He found the inspiration for *The Hobbit* in *Beowulf* and other relevant sagas, but he created a new work of art which belongs to a written tradition.

Prof. Michael Fox's reading of *Beowulf*, *Örvar-Odds saga*, and *The Hobbit* gives the readers and scholars a fresh insight into oral-formulaic theory, and formula itself. Once the potential of formula is extended from the lexical level to the levels of half-lines, themes, motifs, digressions, episodes, and story-patterns, it becomes clearer that Parry's and Lord's initial idea is not so far from being true – it is not just the structure of individual lines, but the works of art in general that are affected by formula. Everything that is uttered in a poem, even the most mundane of repetitions, bears the stamp of some higher structure to which it belongs and which it makes complete. Just like Bilbo Baggins enables the whole great adventure by his small or not so small contributions, every word of an epic makes the entire epic function as a whole. Fox purports that it is not the verbatim repetition, but the process of making an epic that shows how a formula functions inside that epic, thus offering a much wider meaning of what formula is. After almost one hundred years of the establishing of oral-formulaic theory, Fox shows that the new direction of investigating the oral nature of a work of art will not be the enumeration of the exactly repeated lines and phrases in order to show the crude nature of oral song-making, but the discovering of the much more subtle nuances of the whole structure of an oral poem breathing in the environment of an all-encompassing tradition.

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