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THE (UN)KNOWN *BEOWULF*
– WALKING THROUGH THE SHADOWS
OF AN OLD ENGLISH EPIC

This article presents selected aspects of the anonymous Old English epic *Beowulf* in which the elements of the world of fantasy are intertwined with historical episodes, and Christian values co-occur with the images of pagan rites. Written in the vernacular and to the rhythm of alliterative metre *Beowulf* is an example of the highest artistic achievement. The anonymous poet skillfully depicted the harsh Northern world shaped by the Christian culture. Although *Beowulf* has been studied since the beginning of the 19th century many fundamental issues are still unresolved. With the focus on the source text and its manuscript context some of the puzzles may yet be unravelled.

KEYWORDS: *Beowulf*, epic, Old English, manuscript, editions

In classical Aristotelian terms an epic, like a tragedy, centres on one man but focuses on pivotal episodes of his life instead of narrating his whole existence from beginning to end. The movements are, preferably, complicated by reversals of direction. Since the illusion of actuality need not be sustained, an epic may contain elements of improbability. Its heroes must be outstanding for their deeds and for their suffering. Notwithstanding their moral strength and noble character, they may not be entirely free from frailties or errors. Later authors uphold these essential premises, stressing the necessity of beginning *in medias res*, acknowledging or defying the notion of actual historical events as the epic's proper subject. Due to the apparently fuzzy boundaries between epic and history medieval authors, such as, Isidore of Seville and Venerable Bede, regarded an epic as a mixed form combining drama and narrative. The former writes in his *Etymologies* that heroic verse narrates the deeds of brave men and that in it "heroes are spoken of as men practically supernatural and worthy of Heaven on account of their wisdom and bravery" (quoted after Preminger 1974: 243). The excellence of heroes and the grandeur of events are conjoined with seriousness of tone and elegance in expression.

This traditional defining framework, originating in the Aristotelian model of an epic, was devised for classical Greek and Roman works. Yet, nearly all its

components can be found in the Old English *Beowulf* – the longest and, perhaps, the earliest notable poem in the vernacular. W. P. Ker (1908: 153-175; 1st ed. 1897) compared it to Homeric and Virgilian epics and thus paved the way for later literary critics to see the poem as “a kind of national epic” and “a foundational text in English literary history” (cf. Fulk et al. 2008: cxxiii, and ft. 1).¹ Like many other epics, *Beowulf* combines elements of history, myth and drama. Some names which appear in the text, for example, Hygelac (note an independent reference made by Gregory of Tours) or Merewioingas (i.e. the Merovingian, presumably alluding to the Frankish king) denote actual historical figures. They are mentioned next to those of half-mythical men like the legendary Scyld Scefing or Beow – the ancestors of Woden and the progenitors of the Danish royal line. Occasional digressions, references to past or future events and stories told by the *dramatis personae* increase the complexity of the narrative structure. This unsteady advancement of the unfolding plot, first pinpointed by Klaeber (1936, 3rd ed., pp. lvii-lviii), is further enhanced by quick shifts of action and enriched by *topoi* found in traditional epic poetry, such as, a sea-voyage (lines: 210-224^a; 1903^b-1919^b), gift-giving in the hall (lines 1020^a-1057^a), or the hero’s arming before the fight (lines 1441^b-1464^b); (cf. also Fulk et al. 2008: xcvi). This narrative style, in which frequent reversals and digressive intrusions breach the linearity of the tale, has been compared to the appositive style, particularly favoured by the anonymous *Beowulf* master. Fulk et al. (2008) draws attention to the fact that the inorganic mode of narration has been shown to bear comparison with the early Germanic visual arts (see also Leyerle 1967):²

Influential comparison has been drawn between the digressive manner of narration and the interlace designs everywhere in evidence in Anglo-Saxon metalwork, sculpture, and manuscript ornament. Especially in the latter part of the poem, when the strands of the account of the Swedish wars are woven through the narrative, analogy may be drawn to the way elongated forms such as animals’ limbs and serpents are intertwined in Anglo-Saxon artwork; but interlace has also been perceived in regard to thematic concerns, grammatical apposition, narrative point of view, and the structure of the poem’s action itself.

(Fulk et al. 2008: lxxxiii; cf. also ft. 2, p. lxxxiii and ft. 2, p. xciii)

¹ While appreciating many literary aspects of the Anglo-Saxon epic, Ker considered the poem inferior to the classical works. His criticism was directed, first of all, towards the fantastic elements which made up the central place in the poem. Tolkien (1936) challenged this view arguing that *Beowulf* ought to be evaluated on its own terms and within the framework of its own aesthetics. He claimed that the monsters epitomized the main theme of the poem by elevating the hero’s struggles with the elusive, evil creatures onto a universal, cosmic level. For an outline of the early criticism of the poem and references to later literature see Fulk et al. (2008: cxxii-cxxix). Note, however, that Tolkien did not classify *Beowulf* as an epic, and claimed that “no terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures exactly fit” (Tolkien 1936).

² Note that *Bogurodzica*, the famous Polish medieval hymn, has also been shown to echo iconographic patterns, i.e. Deesis, see Mazurkiewicz (1983).

The technical apparatus used by the anonymous master to recount the tale is deeply rooted in the long-standing West-Germanic tradition of the alliterative metre. Although the constraints of this metrical form must have been quite a challenge for some authors the competence of the *Beowulf* poet in that respect is indeed impressive. Metrical coherence is maintained at all levels of poetical composition, beginning with single verses, which are the fundamental building blocks of alliterative metre, through poetical lines and composite verse paragraphs. Traditional components of the Old Germanic verse are skillfully embedded in the poem's structure: fixed formulas and metrical fillers are never semantically empty, kennings and metaphorical figures are vivid, synonyms enliven the narrative and reinforce subtle shades of meaning while *hapax legomena* make the readers (or, ideally, listeners) alert to novel and unpredictable poetical images. The apparent monotony of the repetitive alliterative formula is overridden by variation – multiple statement of the same concept in different words. In *Beowulf* this rhetorical device is never applied automatically. On the contrary, the poet develops the meaning gradually, adding synonymous phrases to clarify, amplify and emphasize the mental picture until it is formally and logically complete. Envelope patterns, which hinge on the idea of using the same word or phrase at the beginning and at the end of a longer, self-contained passage, help to consolidate its underlying structure. Although the metre of Old English poetry is incomparable to dactylic hexameter recommended by the classical authors as the suitable medium for an epic, the elegance and the flexibility of *Beowulf* metrical structures correspond to the dignity of poetic diction and the richness of its stylistic apparatus.

However complex, the poem's composition is extraordinarily well balanced and organized around three major incidents and the main hero Beowulf – a man of unique form (*ænlic ansyn*, line 251^a) and of matchless size: “Never have I seen a greater man on earth, than this one amongst you, the man in gear” (*Næfre ic maran geseah eorla ofer eorþan, þonne is eower sum, secg on searwum*, lines 247^b-249^a; my translation, M.O.). This courageous young warrior of royal descent, the nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats (a tribe living in the south of Sweden), rescues the Danish king Hrothgar and his people from a murderous monster Grendel and his fierce mother. Endowed with supernatural strength and divine support, as befits an epic's hero, he defeats the monstrous enemies and returns to his land in glory. Fifty years later Beowulf – now a wise and experienced king of the Geats, stands up to fight again, this time to protect his own people from a dangerous dragon. Abandoned on the battlefield by all his companions save one, Wiglaf, he defeats the dragon but dies of a fatal wound. This final, heroic episode in the life of a single man and his subsequent semi-pagan funeral close the Anglo-Saxon epic.

Regarded as the best Old English poem *Beowulf* has been studied thoroughly and from different perspectives ever since its description in Wanley's *Catalogue* (1705) drew the attention of an Icelandic historian and a royal archivist to the Danish king Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín in 1787. Thorkelín's edition of the poem

(which was eventually published in 1815), based on a meticulous examination of the source, was soon followed by other, complete or partial editions of the text. Not all of them, however, were based on close manuscript reading; some relied on facsimiles, notably, the one published by Zupitza in 1882.³ Editorial efforts to bring the medieval poem to light have resulted in continued scholarly research which yielded numerous studies often reflecting the changing currents in textual and literary criticism. Although more than two centuries of extensive *Beowulf* scholarship have given considerable insight into the poem's linguistic, cultural and literary significance, many issues are still unresolved. In fact, some of them are of such a fundamental nature that a question arises of how much we really know about this first extant Old English epic.

Palaeographical evidence indicates that two scribes were engaged in the process of copying the text of the poem into the British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv. But did they *copy* the text from an unknown exemplar, as most scholars are inclined to believe, or did they *create* "the archetype of the epic as we know it today", as argued by Kiernan (2001: 298) – *Beowulf's* latest editor? The problem of the date and provenance of the manuscript, and of the text within, is not merely a technical issue. Establishing the origins, time and milieu of the composition and its intended target may shed light on the poem's designated goal. On the one hand, the epic cannot have been recorded before the events it allegedly refers to (i.e. the Frankish raid mentioned by Gregory of Tours, and dated to the period 516-531A.D.). Neither could it have been registered before the Latin-based writing system was introduced in Britain by Christian monks in the late 6th century. On the other hand, the *terminus ante quem* is delimited by the date of the codex which has been established on palaeographical grounds as ca. 1000 (Ker 1957: xvii, 281). Cultural and archeological evidence has also been considered relevant inasmuch as the text mentions Beowulf's ship moving under sail. This, allegedly, would not have happened in the pre-Viking Age, but arguments to the contrary have also been provided (cf. Fulk et al. 2008: clxix). Other pieces of evidence based on references to the material culture have been refuted as equally inconclusive. Although the poem in the manuscript rendition must be a product of a literate Christian monk, its origins may go a long way back to the heathen Germanic past and the oral-formulaic tradition (see, for example, Magoun 1953; Cassidy and Ringler 1975). This line of interpretation prevailed in the 19th and early 20th

³ Zupitza's facsimile is complemented by a diplomatic edition of the original. More importantly, perhaps, it incorporates Thorkelin's readings of the defective parts of the manuscript. Although Thorkelin prepared his transcripts after the Cottonian Library fire in 1731 had partly damaged the codex, some fragments of the text were still more legible in 1878 than a century later. Hence, Zupitza's transliteration contains more than his facsimile or, in some instances, the manuscript itself. However, Kiernan's comparative analyses of the 18th-19th century transcripts and his *Electronic Beowulf 4.0* (2015, 4th ed.) indicate that Zupitza's reproduction of the manuscript is not always reliable (cf. also Kiernan 2001: 278). For a comprehensive, though non-exhaustive, list of partial and complete editions, and the facsimiles of *Beowulf* see, for example, Fulk et al. (2008: 475).

centuries when scholars tried to deconstruct Anglo-Saxon poems into pagan and Christian layers, assuming that the latter may have been later interpolations. Often these attempts proved futile, especially when the elements of the two co-existing traditions were fused as strongly as in *Beowulf* (cf. Klaeber 1936: xlvi–li). Of all types of evidence linguistic data favour an early date of composition in the most uniform, though by no means categorical, way. In the closing section on the date and place of *Beowulf* Fulk et al. (2008) declares:

The value of all the various sorts of evidence proposed in regard to identifying both the poem's date and place of composition is of course quite uneven. In the present state of scholarship, the lack of consensus would in fact appear to depend less on the volume of evidence available than on scholarly disagreement about the relative weight to be attached to the varieties of evidence.

(Fulk et al. 2008: clxxx)

Amongst the numerous contributions to the animated debate on the enigmatic Anglo-Saxon epic which have appeared in the past decade three works are of particular consequence, not only for medievalists but also for amateur enthusiasts: *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight of Finnsburg* (ed. by Fulk et al. 2008, 4th ed.), J.R.R. Tolkien's *Beowulf. A Translation and Commentary* (ed. by Ch. Tolkien, 2014), and *The Electronic Beowulf 4.0* (a free online version ed. by K. Kiernan, 2015, 4th ed.). The first two, though autonomous publications, may be considered complementary. To be more precise, the revised and updated Klaeber may serve as a supplementary reference book to Christopher Tolkien's edition of his father's early oeuvre. This is because at the time when J.R.R. Tolkien worked on his critical translation of the poem (which was completed by 1926) Frederick Klaeber's *Beowulf* was the standard scholarly edition of the poem. Although Tolkien was often critical of this work, he also esteemed it and "assumed the possession of or at any rate easy access to a copy of 'Klaeber'" (Tolkien 2015: xii). The revised fourth edition of Klaeber's seminal work preserves all the aspects of the original and incorporates a comprehensive commentary on various aspects of *Beowulf* scholarship that has appeared since 1936. Much as it is an autonomous volume in its own right, it also offers a unique apparatus for the study of Tolkien's *Beowulf* through the eyes of his contemporary editor as well as in the light of later research in the field.

The third of the aforementioned resources is, in fact, an extensive digital project which combines scholarly expertise and the advantages of modern technology. *The Electronic Beowulf 4.0* provides access to all 70 folios of Ms. Cotton Vitellius which contain *Beowulf* via high definition images, ultraviolet images and backlit images. Due to the applied technologies many hitherto illegible letters and parts of letters on the charred and brittle edges of the codex have been rendered visible. In addition to the electronic facsimile, it incorporates other renditions of the text (i.e. critical editions, collations, transcripts), toolkits for testing conjectural emendations, search

facilities (i.e. edition search and transcript search), a hypertext dictionary, and access points to standard components of any editorial apparatus, such as, translation, grammar and metre. This project is an effect of a long, in-depth process of studying the text of the epic in its manuscript context. According to Kiernan (2001: 277), “since the inauguration of *Beowulf* studies in the early nineteenth century, scholars have shown surprisingly little interest in the unique *Beowulf* manuscript. Facsimiles have been available for the past century, seemingly belying this assertion, but to a large extent they have only impeded a real understanding of the manuscript”. Having placed the manuscript in the centre of his *Beowulf* research, Kiernan came to an intriguing, albeit unorthodox, theory about the poem itself.

At the core of Kiernan’s theory (presented originally in Kiernan 1981; [rev. ed. 1996], and summarized in Kiernan 2001) lies the presumption that the extant text of the epic is contemporaneous with its medium, i.e. the only surviving *Beowulf* codex, and was written in the 11th c. by scribes who could have been close to the author. This hypothesis contradicts the prevailing theories which favour the period between the 8th and the 10th c. as the plausible time of the poem’s composition. An early date was strongly advocated by Klaeber (1936: cvii): “It is furthermore to be taken for granted that a poem so thoroughly Scandinavian in subject-matter and evincing the most sympathetic interest in Danish affairs cannot well have been composed after the beginning of the Danish invasions towards the end of the 8th century”. The same conviction was upheld by Tolkien (2014):

The poem belongs to that great outburst of missionary enterprise which fired all England, when the English were busy with the conversion of Frisia and Germany, and the reorganization of the disordered Gaul: to the days in fact of St. Wynfrith (or Boniface), the apostle of Germany, and martyr in Frisia, the Englishman who has been held to have had a greater influence on Europe’s history than any later Englishman.

(Tolkien 2014: 171)

Kiernan (2001: 278) argues that scholars who urged “an incalculably long and complicated transmission of the original text” were all too prone to introduce textual emendations often unnecessarily filling up the apparent lacunae in places which they believed to be metrically inaccurate or logically incomplete. His own detailed re-analysis of the ambiguous parts of the manuscript made him conclude that *Beowulf* was originally copied by two scribes who understood the text and treated it as a separate book that was later added to the prose part of the codex. Consequently, many alterations discernible on the manuscript folios may not result from scribal mistakes. Rather, they are manifestations of collaborative attempts to integrate two independent parts of the tale: *Beowulf*’s Danish achievements and the dragon episode. Scribal efforts to revise the text are mostly detectable in one section of the manuscript, between folios 163-180, and especially between folios 171-179. This section includes a part of the text known as “*Beowulf*’s Homecoming”, a brief and abrupt account of the hero’s transition from Denmark

to his own native land (lines 1888-2199, folio 172v). This sudden relocation becomes even more intriguing in the light of palaeographical evidence: “[t]he transition in the script is as abrupt and unplanned as Beowulf’s decision to go home” (Kiernan 2001: 288) – the second scribe takes over in the middle of line 1993^b. According to Kiernan, this palaeographical cue suggests that “Beowulf’s Homecoming” may have been composed to bind the two parts of the text, which had been originally preserved in two different manuscripts (perhaps as two distinct poems), and that it may have been the first episode inscribed in the extant codex.

Not only does the handwriting change on folio 172v. There are systematic differences in letter shapes, the number of rulings, the internal arrangement of sheets within gatherings, the width of the writing grid between the two scribal components. There is also evidence that the second scribe intentionally concealed his attempts to squeeze in additional lines of the text in the transition section – “by deliberately ignoring the first scribe’s inner rulings, and by carefully spacing the lines of his own text so that he would progressively pick up enough room for an extra line of text per page” (Kiernan 2001: 291). According to Kiernan, he may possibly have done so because he had already copied the second part of the text, i.e. the dragon episode, which was supposed to be the poem’s finale. Erasures and corrections introduced by the second scribe into his own text and into the first scribe’s part directly preceding the transition section also seem to testify to a diligent process of text (re)arrangement rather than to a mechanical copying from an exemplar.

But the most spectacular and bewildering segment of the *Beowulf* manuscript comes at folio 179. Zupitza’s (1959: 102) editorial note is limited to a brief remark: “All that is distinct in the FS. in fol. 179 has been freshened up by a later hand”. This opinion was echoed by later scholars, notably by Tolkien (2014):

At *Beowulfe* we begin on folio 179r a sadly dilapidated page, mutilated as usual at the right edge, but also faded badly, and ‘freshened up’ where visible by some later (and unauthorized) hand: the hand of someone either ignorant of Old English or much at sea as to the drift of the passage.

(Tolkien 2014: 350-351)

The “freshening up” theory was first challenged by Tilman Westphalen (1967), who argued that the folio was a palimpsest. The entire folio, he claimed, was washed and scoured, and subsequently filled in with text again. Since some of the letters of fol. 179r are illegible, the writing process must have taken place soon after cleansing when the surface had not yet dried up and the ink did not adhere well. A detailed palaeographical analysis made Westphalen conclude that the second *Beowulf* scribe was the author of the new text inscribed on the palimpsest. Any differences in the script, as compared to the regular pages he copied, were attributed to the natural development in a professional scribe’s handwriting, which

implies that the scribe must have had access to the codex for a considerable time. Kiernan (2001: 286), who pursued the same line of investigation, concluded: “The incipient state of the text on the palimpsest, and the fact that it displays in any case a later script than the rest of the manuscript, opens the possibility that the *Beowulf* manuscript amounts to an unfinished draft of the poem.”

Can the allegedly late date of the poem be reconciled with the historical landscape of 11th-century Britain? After all, though written in Old English the Anglo-Saxon epic is essentially Scandinavian. The exploits of the main hero and the grandeur of the two royal houses depicted in the tale – that of Hrothgar and that of Hygelac – glorify the Northern Germanic dominion. Given the strained relations between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings from late 8th to the early 11th century, one might be inclined to follow Klaeber’s reasoning (see above) and associate the genesis of the poem (though not that of the codex) with the more peaceful pre-Viking period. Yet, Kiernan argues convincingly that in the early decades of the 11th c. the relations between the two nations became more stable, in particular during the reign of Canute the Great of the royal Scylding dynasty. In his ingenious attempt to correlate actual historical events with the epic fiction, Kiernan (2001: 299) considers the poet to be “the last survivor of a noble race”, bequeathed with an enormous legacy: “If the last poet of *Beowulf* was the second scribe, as the palaeographical and codicological evidence encourages one to believe, he increased and continued to polish an Anglo-Saxon treasure during the reign of a Danish Scylding lord”.⁴

One can hardly resist the temptation to compare Kiernan’s reading of the poem to some recent interpretations of another Anglo-Saxon epic tale – The Bayeux Tapestry. Though not in words, the Bayeux masterpiece recounts vividly the final, dramatic years of Anglo-Saxon England and its hero – the conquered English people. Possibly designed by an anonymous Anglo-Saxon artist and stitched by a group of his native English embroiderers it can be read as a silent cry and a subversive testament of the few who survived the decline of their defeated lords (see, for example, Bridgeford 2001; Opalińska 2011).

Tolkien’s hero and his world are much different. They are immersed in the ancient rites of the martial North and “descending from the not very remote pagan English past” (Tolkien 2014: 172) where heathen customs and beliefs do not fade away instantaneously the moment Christian missionaries arrive in *Brittene igland*. This is a world in which the “historial legend” and the fairy story (or folktale)

⁴ Kiernan’s hypothesis concerning the late origins of the poem has not been universally acknowledged but even scholars who remain sceptical on this point admit that his analysis narrowed the dating for *Beowulf* (Treharne 1984). A number of studies on various related matters support Kiernan’s theory (see, for example, Chase 1981). The analysis of some linguistic structures in *Beowulf* also furnishes some evidence in favour of the late date of the poem’s composition (notably, Niles’s paper on “The Danes and the Date of *Beowulf*”, read at the meeting of the medieval Association of the Pacific on 28 March 1980; cf. references in Kiernan 2001: 278).

are welded into the history and politics via diplomatic speeches of the mighty kings like Hrothgar, and symbolic figures of the Tales of Wonder like Unferth (lit. un-peace, quarrel) whose role is to stir peace (cf. Tolkien 2014: 204-210). This is a world of ship-burials and gabled halls, in which even saints rush to raise their weapon against evil powers. This is the home of Beowulf – “the last king whose fall presaged the end of the people’s independence (as is clearly foreshadowed in the poem *Beowulf*)” (Tolkien 2014: 215). Like other characters in the poem Beowulf is not depicted visually. His character, rather than his personal appearance, is revealed through his words and his deeds. In Tolkien’s portrait of the hero we meet a man who is

[s]teadfast, loyal, chivalrous (according to the sentiment of the author’s time), but with a smouldering fire. He is on the good side: his enemies are wild beasts, monstrous and evil creatures, or his king’s or people’s foes. But when roused he is capable of violent and superhuman action. If he does not wholly follow the sober counsels of wisdom, he satisfies their most important prescription. He speaks *gilp* (proud vows) in the heat of his heart but he performs his vow – even to his last day, when it cost him his life.

(Tolkien 2014: 213)

Tolkien’s *Beowulf*, an early translational endeavour, was subject to later authorial revisions as Tolkien, the professor of Old English at Oxford (1925-1959), lectured on the poem. Published posthumously many decades after it had been accomplished, appended with a textual commentary and selected excerpts from his lectures on the subject, the book bears witness to Tolkien’s personal insight into the celebrated medieval masterpiece. On the one hand, it can be regarded as a “memorial volume, a portrait (as it were) of a scholar in his time, in words of his own” – to use Christopher Tolkien’s remark from the preface (Tolkien 2014: xiii). On the other, it is a serious scholarly work, an exemplar of meticulous and efficient philological analysis of the Old English text. Thus, the target audience can be the general reader and an admirer of Tolkien-the artist who re-enlivens the long-vanished world, as well as professional Anglo-Saxonists focused on the textual and linguistic richness the poem still has to offer.

The former will be thrilled to discover in the lines of *Beowulf* some archetypes of Tolkien’s later literary concepts. One such example is the aforementioned Unferth – “a literary relative of those wicked counselors that have the ear of the aged kings”, akin to Grima from *The Lord of the Rings*. Another is the dragon bereft of his precious treasure by a cunning thief, which echoes a similar episode from *The Hobbit*:

[...] below lay a path little known to the men. Therein went some nameless man, creeping in night to the pagan treasure; his hand seized a goblet deep, bright with gems. This the dragon did not after in silence bear, albeit he had been cheated in his sleep by thief’s cunning. [...] Then was the keeper of the barrow swollen with wrath, purposing, fell beast, with fire to avenge his precious drinking-vessel. Now was the day faded to the serpent’s

joy. He would no longer tarry on the mountain-side, but went blazing forth glowing fires and set ablaze the shining halls – the light of the burning leapt forth to the woe of men. No creature then did that fell winger of the air purpose to leave alive. Wide might it be seen how the serpent went to war, the malice of that fell oppressor, from near and far be seen how the destroyer in battle pursued and humbled the people of Geats. Back to his Hoard he sped to his dark hall ere the time of day. He had wrapped the dwellers in the land of flame, in fire and burning; he trusted in his barrow, in its wall and his own warlike might, and his trust cheated him.

(Tolkien 2014: 80-81)

Through Tolkien's learned eyes we enter the treasure-hoard of ancient Anglo-Saxon imagery. Even short excerpts like the one above display his philological sensitivity and ingenuity. The synonyms, metaphors and kennings used in the original to denote the dragon (OE *draca*) are carefully re-translated into his Modern English version: "the keeper of the barrow" (OE *beorges hyrde*), "the serpent" (OE *wyrm*), "fell winger" (OE *lað lyft-floga* = lit. hateful light-flier), "the destroyer in battle" (*guð-sceaða* = battle-enemy; *sceaða* = fiend, devil). Three phrases in this quotation deserve further notice: "fell beast", "fell winger" and "fell oppressor". The reiterated qualifier "fell" has no straightforward equivalent in the Old English text. The rationale for this translational choice can be found in Tolkien's famous essay "*Beowulf*: The monsters and the critics" in which he argues that "the malicious, terrifying creature from *Beowulf* approaches *draconitas* rather than *draco*" (Tolkien 1936: 259), and symbolizes the vices of malice and greed. The winged dragon from the epic stands out as an exceptional creature when compared to the more common earth dragons from contemporary hagiographical and legendary literature (cf. Fulk et al. 2008: lxxviii, 241); note however, that St. Augustine in his commentaries to the psalms describes dragons as beasts soaring in the air (see Kobielius 2002: 296). The identification of the dragon with the devil from the Book of Revelations ("And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan [...]", 12:9) accords with religious associations stressed in Tolkien's erudite commentary and encoded in his translation of the poem. Similar interpretations of a dragon as a symbol of Satan in the fake form of a luminous angel are also present in medieval bestiaries, notably in *The Bestiary Ms Ashmole* 1511, Bodleian Library, Oxford and *The Aberdeen Bestiary Ms. 24*, Aberdeen University Library (cf. Kobielius 2002: 296).

Tolkien had a rare gift of animating the past. In *Beowulf* his meticulous philological analysis resolves textual cruxes and illuminates the intentions of the anonymous poet. This is why the translation ought to be read along with his papers and commentaries. Not only do they shed light on the forlorn world of the ancient heroes and their incessant combat against evil, but they also disambiguate the images fossilized in the grammatical structures and the archaic diction of the Old English poetical language. Crucially, they direct the attention towards the source text revealing its beauty and its hitherto unresolved paradoxes.

The long and complicated history of *Beowulf* scholarship is almost like an epic itself. Its early days are marked by the dramatic episode of the library fire. The manuscript survived but not untouched. The burnt edges of the folios crumbled further as time passed until many words and letters have become irretrievably lost. Meticulous analysis of two early transcripts did help to identify some barely legible words. Conjectural emendations filled some of the lacunae. The advancement of digital humanities in modern times paved the way for further textual reconstruction. All along the tale of *Beowulf* was reinterpreted in the light of different literary theories. The hero and his world have been reshaped by the modern eye. One of the theories hinges on the assumption that “the members of the poet’s original audiences may have responded to the narrative in different ways, some of them irreconcilable, in a manner analogous to the poem’s reception today” (cf. Fulk et al. 2008: lxxix and references there). Yet, this seems to be a far-fetched assumption. Much as the medieval age was perturbed by theological controversies and the turmoil of endless wars, its foundations were homogeneous and enduring. Given this, the medieval perception of the epic must have been much more uniform than ours. Hopefully, with the focus on the source text and the manuscript the shadowy areas of the Anglo-Saxon world with its heroic warriors and their monstrous foes can acquire more distinct contours.

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