

Reviewer's address

Foreign Language Centre, College of Humanities
 University of Exeter
 Queen's Building, Queen's Drive
 Exeter EX4 4QH
 UK
 e-mail: F.J.Alvarez-Lopez@exeter.ac.uk

Leonard Neidorf. 2017. *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior*. (Myth and Poetics II.) Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. Pp. xx + 200. 978-1-50170-828-2.

Reviewed by ANDREW BREEZE, University of Navarre

In forty years, this reviewer has never read a more brilliant and compelling account of Beowulf than the one here. He thinks it more helpful than Tolkien's (1936) lecture 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics'; as regards other Old English texts, *The Transmission of Beowulf* is (in his opinion) excelled only by Kenneth Sisam's *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953). Sisam has prior place because the advances which he set out were his own, whereas Professor Neidorf presents advances made by others, particularly R. D. Fulk of Cornell University.

For its contribution to learning, then, *The Transmission of Beowulf* deserves classic status. Its author is a new star rising in the firmament of Anglo-Saxon scholarship. His book, offering resounding proofs for Beowulf as a Mercian text composed in the years about 700, also provides an x-ray of the strange things said by Anglo-Saxonists since the 1970s.

It was then that some scholars came to regard Beowulf as a late work, perhaps hardly older than the manuscript of about the year 1000 in which it survives. A new and fashionable relativism, with a failure to understand arguments of exact philology and metrics, was in the air. How Neidorf exposes its defects makes for exhilarating and even entertaining reading. On this subject he quotes the poet and textual scholar A. E. Housman (1859–1936) for textual scholarship as an art which requires consequent reasoning and coherent thought. These qualities ever being rare, Neidorf's study is a powerful

weapon against irrationalism. It tells the truths on matters other than Old English.

Again and again, Neidorf shows *Beowulf* as an early work, containing narrative, verbal, and metrical archaisms which confused the scribes who copied it in the early eleventh century (or else their predecessors). Through no fault of their own, they lacked knowledge of eighth-century English prosody, language, and heroic tradition, on which scholars of the twenty-first century often know more than they did. Hence the presence of corruptions; hence, too, the insistence of weak and conservative critics that what we find in the manuscript is not wrong (as a rational person might think), but perfectly sound and not to be changed. Neidorf and his authorities are, fortunately, made of sterner stuff. Let us give instances of what they say.

In line 18, which editors understand as ‘Beow was renowned, his fame sprang wide’, the scribe wrote “Beowulf”. Early genealogies name Beow as Scyld’s son; the form *Beowulf* also ruins the metre. Wise critics hence conclude that a copyist substituted famous Beowulf for obscure Beow as a *lectio facilior*. Less intelligent ones defend the manuscript reading on the grounds that the poet perhaps knew “an alternative tradition” or “invented details of Danish history”, as Neidorf notes (p. 74). Who is correct should be evident.

Lines 902–903 tell of Heremod’s fate: “Among the Jutes he was betrayed into the hands of enemies”. But the manuscript reads *eotenum* ‘giants’ and not *Eotum* ‘Jutes’. Implication: a scribe, knowing nothing of this ancient Germanic people, altered *Eotum*, which he did not understand, to *eotenum*, which he did. That ‘Jutes’ makes good sense and ‘giants’ very little was of no concern. As Neidorf observes, to him “there simply were no Jutes in *Beowulf*, only giants” (p. 85).

In lines 2920–2921 (“The good will of the Merovingian was ever afterward unobtainable for us”), the manuscript has meaningless *mere wio ingas*. That has long been restored as *Merewioingas* ‘Merovingian’. The scribe plainly failed to recognise this name for the Frankish people. We are luckier. We can close spaces and restore an archaic form, which Neidorf notes (p. 89) as coming from “native vernacular tradition” and not any late written Latin source, as claimants for a late *Beowulf* would have us believe.

The scope of this volume, and what it succeeds in doing, will now be clear. It is a book to use as an introduction to the practice of textual scholarship as a whole, and not just Old English. It has a surprise at the end. After many pages of most satisfying analysis, Neidorf has an appendix on Tolkien’s translation of and commentary on *Beowulf*, published at last in 2014. Tolkien’s learning was

great and it is good to find that his posthumous publication puts him on the side of the angels, both for *Beowulf* as an early Old English poem, and as the work of one poet and not two or more (an older philological dragon, rightly slain by Tolkien in his 1936 paper).

In the anarchy of modern academic discourse, one greets *The Transmission of Beowulf* as one might a doctor in a lunatic asylum. There are lessons here for all. Leonard Neidorf has performed a supreme service for the academy. He defends rationality against its perennial enemies; he gives heart to those who love the objective and dispassionate analysis of our texts. What he says should be taken very seriously indeed by Anglo-Saxon scholars all over the world.

Reviewer's address
 Departamento de Filología
 Lenguas Modernas
 Universidad de Navarra
 Campus Universitario, s/n
 31009 Pamplona, Spain
 email: abreeze@unav.es

Tim William Machan. ed. 2016. *Imagining Medieval English. Language Structures and Theories, 500–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiii + 320. 978-1-107-05859-0.

Reviewed by JUAN CAMILO CONDE-SILVESTRE, Universidad de Murcia¹

Imagining Medieval English is, in the title-words of the introduction by its editor, Tim William Machan, a book about “[t]he metaphysics of medieval English” (pp. 3–12) and the processes of “categorization” behind its study. These two labels make better sense when they are seen in the context of two commonly held premises in historical linguistics. The first one is the well-

¹ Financial support for this research has been provided by Fundación Séneca, the Murcian Agency for Science and Technology, Programas de Apoyo a la Investigación (19331-PHCS-14).