

BOOK REVIEW

The Transmission of *Beowulf*: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior. Leonard Neidorf. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii+200.

The present book sets out to decide finally and conclusively one of the main questions that has occupied *Beowulf* scholars since the poem was first published: When was the poem originally composed? To answer that question, the author examines in forensic detail the corruptions in the text introduced by the scribes. These are principally those words or passages in the poem where the transmitted text fails to make metrical, lexical, syntactic, or onomastic sense (chaps. 1–3, 1–101). He then articulates a theory of scribal behavior (chap. 4, 103–32) and discusses the larger issues of the unity of *Beowulf* (chap. 5, 133–62), before briefly treating the recently published critical commentary by Tolkien (appendix, 163–73). A useful glossary of terms (175–77), bibliography (179–93), index of verses (195–97), and index of subjects (199–200) complete the volume.

There has never been serious doubt that *Beowulf* contained early material and traditions antedating the extant manuscript by some centuries. The critical debate has centered on when, where, and through what intermediaries that material took shape in the manuscript. At the two ends of the spectrum of opinion were those who argued that that the poem took written form early, most likely in the eighth century and in an Anglian dialect, and was copied in the tenth or eleventh century into London, British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A xv; and by contrast, those who argued that the poem was a product of a late tenth- or eleventh-century antiquarian who composed in a predominantly late West-Saxon dialect, and whose work was copied into the manuscript soon after. There have been many arguments for positions between these two extremes. In my opinion, this book renders much of that debate redundant. The evidence analyzed and

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the arguments articulated here make virtually certain the existence of an eighth-century Mercian poem, in most important respects identical with the extant copy produced by two early eleventh-century scribes, and adapted to their late West-Saxon dialect.

Neidorf brings an array of philological tools to the work as well as incisive logic. He combines linguistic and dialectal analysis with recent theoretical work on meter to show that the majority of acknowledged scribal corruptions in the manuscript can be rectified by emendation to forms that were current in eighth-century Mercian. Restoration of accurate meter by this means resolves a striking number of textual difficulties and anomalies. Overall, the main source of textual corruption (and Neidorf does not shy away from that term, which has fallen into desuetude more widely) is shown to be the scribes' habit of trivialization, that is, of making unfamiliar words in the text look like familiar words, often irrespective of contextual sense. This process is starkly illustrated by personal names, where *Ēomēr*, for example, becomes *geōmor* (sad) because the scribe was unfamiliar with the name and the tales relating to that character. As Neidorf shows, the scribes worked methodically to make the text atomistically intelligible with meaningful lexemes: at this level, they were "preoccupied with form and indifferent to sense" (32).

Chapter 4 (103–32) applies this theory of scribal behavior to the major Old English poetic codices, and to poems that occur in more than one manuscript, though Neidorf is aware of the risks here: "There is little merit and much peril in maintaining unwavering credence in theoretical generalization about Anglo-Saxon scribes" (130). A similarly striking number of textual difficulties and anomalies can be resolved in poems other than *Beowulf* by applying the lexemic theory of scribal behavior. A small caveat here, though, is that the generalization is applied even where there might be reason to suppose some form of oral or memorial transmission, such as in the texts of Cædmon's *Hymn*. The assumption that all of the textual variants in this particular poem can be attributed to (mis) copying has been challenged (Paul Cavill, "The Manuscripts of Cædmon's *Hymn*," *Anglia* 118 [2000]: 499–530), and the example discussed in Neidorf's footnote, *ælda > ældu > eorðu* (122–23), can be economically explained as a result of the dynamics of sound rather than script.

The fifth chapter (133–62) turns to the larger question of the unity of *Beowulf*. Neidorf applies linguistic techniques similar to those used in earlier chapters to this question, arguing that if the poem were made up of elements composed at different times or different places and later assembled, or if there were extensive scribal intervention in the overall story, then one might expect to find significant linguistic, metrical, or stylistic differences between the parts. But a range of linguistic regularities and stylistic features such as archaism appear across the parts of the poem,

brought to light by scribal corruptions. Such work is suggestive rather than comprehensive, since not all details can be considered through the medium of scribal corruption. Proponents of scribal performance or chronological or narrative disparity between the parts of *Beowulf* nevertheless have powerful arguments against their position here.

The appendix (163–73) is a generous tribute to J. R. R. Tolkien's *Beowulf* textual criticism, recently published in an edition by Christopher Tolkien (*Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary, together with Sellic Spell* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014]). Neidorf indicates where Tolkien anticipated some of his arguments and where he and later scholars differ from Tolkien's views. He concludes that the philological impulse tends to bring scholars to congruent views about the poem.

The book is written in a clear, assertive style, and typographical errors are extremely rare. Occasionally I wanted more explanation of points, possibly an exemplification of Shippey's syntactic argument (145), or more explicit illustration of scansion in the metrical discussion, for example. Overall, though, the book is beautifully written and produced.

There will no doubt be discussion of details, but this book will reorient *Beowulf* studies. It mounts a coherent argument for the unity and antiquity of *Beowulf*, showing that it is fundamentally implausible to suggest that a random collection of ad hoc errors produced the regular and predictable corruptions that appear in the extant manuscript. It absolves the scribes of carelessness and recovers the poem from their excessive carefulness. It illuminates the transmission of *Beowulf* powerfully and cogently.

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