Leonard Neidorf: The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture and Scribal Behavior. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. ISBN 9781501705113. ix + 200.

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REVIEW

Leonard Neidorf: *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture and Scribal Behavior*.
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This recently published book makes significant contributions to the study of the trans-
mission of *Beowulf* and to our broader understanding of scribal behavior in all four of
the Old English poetic codices. Neidorf's work, which is built upon the solid philological
foundation of a close and systematic scrutiny of scribal error, falls into two parts. His
introduction discusses the detection of scribal error and the importance of probabilistic
reasoning, and he then proceeds to examine, often in considerable detail, the errors
found in the text of the poem. All errors are classified according to their apparent
causes. Chapter two, "Language History," examines those due to language change (which
includes errors due to either changes in pronunciation or orthography), dialectal differ-
ences, the misunderstanding of syntax, and trivialization (the corruption of unfamiliar
words to similar but familiar words). As Neidorf demonstrates in chapter three,
"Cultural Change," many errors are due to gaps in cultural knowledge. In particular,
the serial corruption of proper names most likely stems from the cultural changes which
occurred between the composition of the poem and the early eleventh-century manu-
script. He argues convincingly that scribes' difficulties with these forms are not the result
of carelessness but instead reveal their unfamiliarity with the names of individuals and
peoples from heroic legend. In a brief survey of the evidence for the circulation of heroic
legend in Anglo-Saxon England he demonstrates that the traditions known to the poet
lost currency during the ninth century and were no longer widely known in the tenth.
The scribes of the surviving manuscript, and perhaps the scribes of antecedent manu-
script copies as well, were thus working in a period when knowledge of the stories that
the poet took for granted on the part of his audience was no longer widely spread. In
this case, as in the case of the scribal mishandling of archaic forms discussed in chapter
two such as the copulative compound *aþumsweoran* 'son-in-law and father-in-law'
(recorded as *aþum swerian* 'to swear oaths' in the manuscript) in line 84b, the pattern
of error in the poem provides valuable information about the dating of *Beowulf*,
supporting the evidence for an early date (c. 700) presented in other philological
investigations in recent decades.

As valuable as these first three chapters are, in the final two chapters Neidorf offers
much more than a systematic discussion and classification of scribal error. He has
developed a theory of scribal behavior on the basis of the evidence presented in the
previous chapters. Chapter four, "Scribal Behavior," is an extended discussion of what he
calls "the lexemic theory": he argues convincingly that the patterns of scribal error
demonstrate that the scribes were not focused on the continuous sense of the poem
but instead concentrated primarily upon transcribing and modernizing individual words.
Despite the implausibility of many forms in their textual context, most of them are
acceptable Old English words and the manuscript is relatively free of the kind of
gibberish we would expect if the scribes were merely careless. He extends his discussion
to include the study of variant readings in parallel texts such as *Solomon and Saturn A*
and *B* and the multiple copies of *Cædmon's Hymn*, and here again he finds that most of

the errors can be explained by a scribal focus on individual words instead of the continuous sense of the text.

As Neidorf emphasizes, the generalization about scribal behavior he presents as the lexemic theory closely resembles the actual assumptions and practice of many editors of Old English poetic texts over the years. But while philologists have tended to the business of text editing, they have neglected the equally important task of articulating their assumptions into a coherent and convincing theory. As a result, competing, less likely theories of scribal behavior have flourished in recent decades. Some theorists have seen parallels between the performance of oral compositions and the copying of written texts, arguing that literate scribes, like oral poets, could be active participants in the recomposition of the poems they copied. Variants as minor as the *ælda/eorðan* alternatives in line 5b of *Cædmon's Hymn* have been attributed to such poetically engaged scribes, as have the more considerable differences between the two texts of *Soul and Body I* and *II* and the closely related texts of *Daniel* and *Azarias*. In his discussion of these texts Neidorf draws upon recent work by Peter Orton (2000) and Paul Remley (2002), who demonstrate that the more substantial differences in both sets of texts most likely result from the efforts of the scribes to compensate for defective exemplars.[1] The case of *Soul and Body* is further complicated by the involvement of a second poet who composed the concluding 40 lines of *SBI*, a passage which is not included in *SBII*. A passage such as this, whatever we might think of its poetic value, it is not the work of a mere scribe. While a poet might well be a scribe, few scribes would have been poets, and the errors in the surviving texts reveal that scribes as a group focused primarily on the copying of individual words, often while paying little or no attention to the continuous sense of the poems they copied.

In his conclusion in chapter five, Neidorf tests the lexemic theory by examining the evidence for the unity of the poem. If scribes regularly interfered with the texts they were copying, changing content and phrasing, and in the process modernizing much of the more subtly archaic features of the meter, the poem would be a mixture of structural archaisms and innovations, and there would be multiple signs of composite authorship. If, on the other hand, there were no scribal revisions more extensive than their focus on individual words, then the entire text of the poem would exhibit a linguistic regularity which distinguishes it from the remainder of the corpus. And so it does. Metrical examples of noncontraction and the absence of parasiting, both of which are archaic features in the early eleventh-century manuscript, are found throughout the entire text. Although these examples of regularity do not rule out the possibility of very early scribal interference, the consistent distribution throughout the poem of metrical examples which adhere to Kaluza's law—the observation that the application or suspension of resolution under secondary stress depends on whether the second of two syllables had once been long—clearly demonstrates the unity of the work, because no other poem exhibits such a consistent adherence to this rule. The regular use of the weak adjective without a demonstrative throughout the entire text of *Beowulf* is in many ways the most striking archaism, because this feature is especially susceptible to scribal interference, requiring only the addition of a demonstrative or an alteration of the inflectional ending of the adjective.

With the addition of this concluding discussion, this book makes valuable contributions to our understanding of many aspects of the transmission of *Beowulf*. Neidorf provides perceptive discussions of the causes of individual errors, classifying each of them; he articulates a much needed theory of scribal behavior; he concisely establishes the unity of the poem; and he demonstrates that the transmission of the poem can only be understood in light of the three centuries which separate its original composition

from the surviving manuscript. This book is essential reading for anyone concerned with *Beowulf* or the study of Old English scribal practice.

References

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