Leonard Neidorf. Foreword by Gregory Nagy. *The Transmission of* Beowulf: *Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior.* Myth and Poetics 2. Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, 2017, 221 pp., 8 illustrations, $ 55.00.

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Leonard Neidorf has written a virtuosic book fundamental to the dating, transmission and scribal emendation of *Beowulf*, for the understanding of Pre-Conquest scribal culture, and for the war on truthiness in Old English literary criticism. *The Transmission of Beowulf* establishes how scribal errors exposed by defective meter and convoluted sense can be explained by the poem's composition around 700 CE. An early date elucidates so many 'patterns' of misconstrual, in fact, that the authorship of *Beowulf* during the age of Bede seems all but irrefutable. Furthermore, such scribal epiphenomena suggest that the *Beowulf* copyists did not engage in quasi-authorial 'performance'– creatively reshaping the text – but simply rectified perceived errors in their exemplar and 'Saxonized' the poem's northern dialects. Sustained by meticulous, ingenious and dispassionate analyses, these world-tilting claims will have a durable impact not only on *Beowulf* studies but also on the profession as a whole, motivating new – and hopefully less impressionistic – ways of reading Old English poetry.

At the outset, Neidorf evaluates the compelling evidence for the early date of *Beowulf*. Two views prevail. The minority position, lately defended by Roberta Frank (2007), claims an uncertain date, anywhere from ca. 685 to the time of the manuscript apograph. The mainstream alternative, expounded by Robert D. Fulk (1992), asserts that the poem was composed in Mercia between 685 and 725. Fulk's conclusions rest on the *Beowulf*-poet's scrupulous adherence to Kaluza's law, "metrical archaisms" (3) antecedent to seventh-century parasiting and contraction, and Mercian spellings. Morphological archaisms (gen. pl. of *i*-stem nouns *deniga* 'of Danes' and *winia* 'of friends'; endingless instr. sg. of *dogor* 'by day'; uninflected infinitives with *to* 'to'; dat. sg. *gehwæm* as fem. of *gehwa* 'who'; *þa* meaning 'now that'), archaic orthography (*ec* 'sword', *sec* 'man' [poetic], *þeo* 'servant' [often a name-element], and etymological spelling *merewioing* 'Merovingian'), obsolescent lexemes (*fengel* 'prince', *gombe* 'tribute', *suhtriga* 'nephew', etc.) and semantic archaisms (*synn* 'violence', *fyren* 'audacity', *hreow* 'sorrow', *gædeling* 'kinsman') reinforce this early date, which coincides with the alleged transcription of *Beowulf* in Insular Set Minuscule script by ca. 750 (Lapidge 2000). The scribes confused multiple allographs in this alphabet, e.g., *a/u* (e.g., *strade*

for *strude*, 3073b), *ð/d* (*stanðeð* for *standeð*, 1362b), *ec/et* (*secan* for *setan*, 1602b). While this avalanche of linguistic, metrical and paleographical evidence alone would sustain the antiquity of *Beowulf*, Neidorf adduces even more for the poem's early date.

Beowulf has approximately 300 scribal errors, 150 of which were emended by the scribes. Reminding us that *Beowulf* is not a "divine relic" (28), Neidorf rejects the editorial conservatism that sometimes legitimizes even blatant errors. For example, in *siþðan camp wearð // to ecgbanan / angan breþer* 'after "strife" became the sword-slayer of his only brother' (1261b–1262b), meter and sense demand disyllabic *Cain* for *camp* 'strife'. Similarly, for *þeod* 'nation' in *wolde [...] sunu þeod wrecan* '[Grendel's mother] intended to avenge her son's "nation"' (1277b–1278b), *deoð* 'death' must be intended. More complex is the substitution of the meaningless *reðes ond hattres* 'cruel [thing] and ?hater' for authorial *oreðes ond attres* in *ic ðær heaðufyres / hates wene, // oreðes ond attres* 'there I anticipate [the dragon's] hot battle-flame, fumes and venom' (2522a–2523a). Challenging such transparent defects anticipates the treatment of less obvious ones. Neidorf minutely analyzes scores of inconspicuous errors, but in defining categories of error and their underlying causes, he has the larger aim of defending liberal – but not impetuous – emendation in general.

Scribal blunders like *camp* < *Cain* and *þeod* < *deoð* often yield genuine Old English lexemes with orthographical profiles similar to the words they supplant, e.g., *wærc* 'pain' > *weorc* 'work'; *feðer* 'feather' > *fæder* 'father'; *hæle* 'fighter' > *helle* 'hell'. Neidorf calls such corruptions "trivializations", which he defines as the substitution of a more common word for a rarer one of similar orthography. Trivialization has multiple motivations, one of which is the unfamiliarity of poetic diction. Hence, *earfeþo* 'misery' replaces the poeticism *eafeþo* 'strength' in *ic merestrengo / maran ahte, // earfeþo on yþum* 'I had the greater might at sea, "misery" on the waves' (533a–534a). Correspondingly, *giogoðe* 'youth' supplants the poeticism *giohðe* 'sorrow' in the patent absurdity *gomel on giogoðe* 'an old man in "youth"' (2793a). OE *fyrena* 'of audacious deeds' replaces *fira* 'of men' (poetic) in *fyrena gehwylcne* 'each "audacious deed"' (2250b). These substitutions convey the copyists' bafflement over exotic vocabulary.

The poet's northern idiolect motivated other trivializations. Neidorf reasons that the scribes mechanically 'Saxonized' Anglian and Mercian spellings:

> When transcribing a form from the exemplar, if a form that accorded better with the [late West Saxon] written standard came to mind, they would commit that form to parchment. If no such form came to mind [...] the scribes would more or less mechanically reproduce the antecedent form. (56)

This perfunctory Saxonization explains the substitution of *æ* for *e*, even when uncalled for, e.g., *wæs* for *wes* ('was!' vs. 'be!', 407a), *þæs* for *þes* ('of the' vs. 'this', 411b), *hwæðre* for *hreðre* ('nevertheless' vs. 'heart', 2819b). While Saxonizing *Beowulf*, the scribes also encountered dialect words which they trivialized by replacing them with late West Saxon approximations: lWS *weorc* 'work' for Anglian *wærc* 'pain', lWS *næfre* 'never' for Mercian *nefne/nemne* 'unless', lWS *under* 'under' for Anglian *underne* 'secret'. Similarly, the scribes restored (analogical) syncopation in forms such as *ælmihtiga* 'almighty', *dogores* 'day' and *ænigum* 'any'. Under the circumstances, it seems remarkable that the scribes preserved any of the unsyncopated verb endings (-*est*, -*eð*, -*ed*) characterizing the Anglian dialectal features of *Beowulf* (142).

Among the most perceptive of Neidorf's trivializations is the "obliteration" of personal, ethnic and topographical names due to cultural remoteness. Citing onomastic evidence from Old English poetry, royal genealogies, Anglo-Latin texts, and early inscriptions, Neidorf asserts the demise of a robust poetic tradition by the tenth century. This cultural erasure retired even the most famous names of the Germanic legendarium. The substitution of *geomor* 'sorrowful' for the name *Eomer* (1960b) illustrates the impulse to emend this forgotten nomenclature. Sometimes the names are given graphemic approximations (*Hreþric* > *hreþrinc* 'noble warrior', 1836a), but sometimes they are completely omitted (*hyrde ic þæt [...] / [...] wæs Onelan cwen* 'I heard that [...] was Onela's queen', 62). Naturally, ethnonyms betray similar obliterations: *Heaðobeardna* ('Battle-Beards') becomes *heaða bearna* (2037b) or *heaðo bearna* (2067a), *Scilfingas* 'Swedes' is turned into *Scildingas* 'Danes' (3005b, attested earlier and more often in *Beowulf*), and *dryhten Wedera* 'lord of Weather(-Geats)' is converted to *dryhten wereda* 'Lord of Hosts' (2186a). In the Finnsburh digression, the misreading of *mid eotenum* 'among the giants' credibly derives from *mid Eotum* 'among the Jutes' (1145a). *Eoten* 'giant' and *Eote* 'Jute' both seem to be of equal rarity, but *eoten* had already appeared four times before the Finnsburh episode and arguably prompted the revision. As further proof of their bafflement, scribes sometimes slowed down to copy these unfamiliar words piecemeal, as in *infr es wæle* 'in Freswæle' ('in the Frisian slaughter', 1070a), *on gen þeo es* 'Ongenþeoes' ('of Ongenþeow', 1968a), *mere wio ingasmilts* 'Merewioingas / milts' ('Merovingians [...] mercy', 2921).

While Neidorf proposes ingenious and convincing motivations underlying trivialization, alternatives may be theorized for some of them. In three instances, he conjectures that the *Beowulf* scribes substituted one syntagm for another: *for mundgripe* [*handgripe* MS] 'on account of my hand-grip' (965a); *æt þam lindplegan* [*hildplegan* MS] 'at the shield-play' (1073b); *wiges* [*hilde* MS] *gefeh* '[the dragon] reveled in warfare' (2298b). Rather than being a copyist's own alternative, as

Neidorf reasons, could 'hand', 'hild', and 'hilde' represent glosses misconstrued as corrections? OE *hild* 'battle' for *lindplega* explains what 'shield-play' is. Correspondingly, OE *side* in *geond þæt \side\ reced* 'throughout the spacious building' (1981a) interprets the whole phrase: Hygd circulated 'widely'. Editors have proposed *geond þæt healreced* 'throughout the hall-building'. Did a copyist omit *heal-* or a similar term because he thought *side* adv. was a reader's proposed (wk. adj.) emendation? Erroneous *ungedefelice* 'inappropriately' (2435b) may be another such case, since adverbs are commonly glossed by *-lice*. This clarification was perhaps misconstrued as an emendation.

Interlinear glossing may explain otiose particles, too. While nugatory *ic* in *Gode ic þanc secge* 'I give thanks to God' (1997b) may indeed betray "anticipatory dittography" (71), pronouns are commonly written in glosses for implicit subjects. In the expression *þara ymbsittendra* 'of the neighboring peoples' (9b), *þara* might conceal an interpolated gloss indicating genitive plural. (Hence, the inexplicable *gara* of *gara cyn* 'kin of the spears' for *Wedera cyn* 'kin of the Weather(-Geats)' (461b) may disguise *þara*.) Reflexive pronoun *hy* in *hy eft gemetton* 'they departed' (2592b) belongs with these examples. If suppletive pronouns are mistaken for editorial substitutions, it seems fitting that words following them are often omitted, e.g., *ðæs ðe ic [wen] hafo* 'as I have expectation of' (3000b); *he [wæs] fag wið God* 'he was alienated from God' (811b); and the preceding example, *side [heal]reced* (1981a).

In chapter 4 Neidorf introduces the "lexemic theory of scribal behavior". This neoteric interpretation of evidence drawn from *Beowulf* and other Old English poems establishes that scribes hewed closely to their copy-texts, making only local changes in words or phrases. In *Beowulf* they copied mechanically, though modernizing and Saxonizing unfamiliar vocables. Scribal performance was purely visual, therefore: "These scribes did not read *poems* when they copied; they read *words*" (130, auth. emph.). Baffled by the poetic idiom, for example, the *Beowulf* scribes often discerned "false grammatical relationships between neighboring words" (60) in expressions that looked ungrammatical. In *Gewat him on nacan* 'he departed on a ship' (1903b), the verse requires nom. sg. *naca* ('the ship set out'), but the scribe construed *naca* as the object of a preposition *on* rather than the subject with ictic adverb *on*. Correspondingly, gen. sg. *Sigemundes* is required in *þæt he fram Sigemundes / secgan hyrde // ellendædum* 'that he had heard tell of Sigemund's courageous deeds' (875a–876a), but the scribe has construed the name as the dat. object of prep. *fram* 'about'. Oblique *ðam* in 2769b *of ðam leoma stod* functions as a pronoun ('from it shone a light'), but the scribes have parsed it as a demonstrative, *of ðam leoman stod* 'it emanated from the light'. Suspected prepositional phrases explain most of this reverse engineering, but archaisms can also give rise to error, as when the dat. sg. noun *aþumsweoran*

'father-in-law and son-in-law' (84b) became dat. pl. *aþum* plus infinitive *swerian* 'to swear by oaths'. These changes are usually restricted to phrases, and even when Scribe B "proofread" the work of Scribe A, he only skimmed the text to spot superficial "anomalies". This habit represents conclusive evidence of proximal, not global, comprehension. As Neidorf reasons, "the scribes were not careless", just "preoccupied with form and indifferent to sense" (104).

Neidorf extends his innovative theory of lexemic copying to the Old English poems often cited as evidence of scribal recomposition. In 1990 Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe suggested that scribes engaged in formulaic re-writing when transcribing Old English verse texts, and the term "performance" came to describe how they were thought to reshape what they copied – not editorially but quasi-authorially. Embracing the work of Daniel P. O'Donnell (1996), Peter Orton (2000), and Paul Remley (2002), Neidorf torpedoes this factitious notion. O'Brien O'Keeffe's evidence in the *Solomon and Saturn* poems conforms to the trivialization and graphemic approximation found in *Beowulf*: *geondmengeð* 'confuses' (MS B) > *gemengeð* 'mixes' (MS A); *dreogeð* 'suffers' (MS B; poetic) > *dreoseð* 'perishes' (MS A); *hædre* 'anxiously' (MS A) > *hearde* 'firmly' (MS B). None of these variants, moreover, is attested in poetic formulae. Furthermore, two instances of interpolated prepositions, probably intrusive glosses, resemble those in *Beowulf*: *irenum aplum* 'by iron balls' (MS B) > *mid irenum æpplum* 'with iron balls' (MS A); *westenes weard* 'protection of a wasteland' (MS B) > *on westenne weard* 'in desolate protection' (MS A). Similar trivializations and interpolations are proposed for "Caedmon's Hymn" and for the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* poems. In "The Battle of Brunanburh", the alteration of *nægledcnearrum* 'with nailed ships' into *dæg gled on garum* 'day ember among spears', and of *woðboran* 'prophet' into *soðboran* 'soothsayer' in "The Death of Edgar" replicates trivializations in *Beowulf*. Finally, the piecemeal transcription of unfamiliar lexemes can also be documented, as in *cul bod ge hna des* for *cumbolgehnastes* 'clashing of standards' in "Brunanburh".

The same kinds of transmissional artifacts occur in the Exeter Book poems, where abundant evidence makes an ironclad case for Neidorf's "lexemic theory". Its explanatory elegance matches its theoretical flexibility. While O'Brien O'Keeffe's model of scribal performance implies that scribes copied texts as authorial collaborators, Neidorf's predicts only the categories of corruptions produced by mechanical copying and their concomitant motivations. In other words, Neidorf credits the distinction between a scribe making errors of transcription and good-faith "emendations" when copying an exemplar, and a poet making aesthetic choices when revising a received text. Only the "lexemic theory", moreover, accounts for the patent lapses in grammar, meter and sense apparently condoned by advocates of scribal performance.

In a superb, cogent and sensible conclusion, Neidorf re-deploys the evidence gathered throughout his book to maintain the unitary authorship of *Beowulf*. Many have anticipated his views, that "what survives of *Beowulf* is essentially the work of the *Beowulf* poet, not a union of scribal laborers" (135). No one, however, has marshaled such consummate and wide-ranging scholarship in support of the poem's homogeneous composition. The distribution of semantic, syntactic, morphological and metrical symptoms mentioned above supports both an early date *and a single author*. Some effects verge on stylistic. The 'suspenseful' use of postponed *syþðan* clauses, for example, is found once in *Dream of the Rood* and four times in *Beowulf* – but nowhere else in the corpus. Nor does *Beowulf* evince any salient disunities, especially in respect to the metrical features attested after ca. 950. One might expect scribal recomposition to have left at least incidental traces of late innovation. Neidorf finds no plausible evidence of recomposition, in fact, but a surfeit of it demonstrating faulty, if conscientious, contamination.

A short review like this hardly does justice to the genius of this astonishing book. *The Transmission of Beowulf* is a *coup de théâtre*, a scholarly manifesto of the utmost importance in its evidentiary rigor, theoretical utility, and vigorous prose. By any measure, it ranks as one of the most pivotal books ever written on Old English literature and will be recognized as a historic achievement.

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