

*The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* by Leonard Neidorf. Cornell University Press, 2017.

One might think that a monograph focused on scribal errors, as Leonard Neidorf's *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* is, would be very limited in what it has to offer. Neidorf, however, demonstrates that close attention to the manuscript and its transmission reveals a great deal about the poem, specifically concerning when it was written, where it was written, and how scribes went about copying the manuscript. In doing so, Neidorf presents a well-reasoned theory about the transmission of *Beowulf* and also shows the importance and continued relevance of rigorous philological scholarship.

Neidorf proposes a theory of transmission called the lexemic theory, which he defines as follows:

The scribes responsible for the transmission of Old English poetry concentrated on individual lexemes while copying in order to modernize and Saxonize their orthography. Considerations of sense and meter were subordinated, when not ignored entirely, to the imperative to regularize orthography. (176)

This theory is significant to textual studies because it obviates the major argument against editorial intervention: that medieval scribes had greater knowledge of Old English than modern editors, so their version of the text should be respected. Neidorf asserts that some scribal error is to be expected because the scribes were so focused on their task at hand, which was not to transmit a poem with sense and meter intact but instead to copy a text word for word while modernizing and correcting it to match their contemporary West Saxon dialect. For this task, the scribes needed only a synchronic understanding of their language; they were not language historians with access to diachronic scholarship. Therefore, the scribes identified words that they did not recognize—which could have been errors from a previous copy, dialectal forms, or archaic words or names no longer in common use—and changed them into words that fit the new West Saxon standard. In doing so, they could create errors in meter, remove a name, or even write a sentence that made no logical or grammatical sense, so long as the individual words were actual words.

Although some of the errors and explanations that Neidorf discusses have been proposed before (as Neidorf himself points out), the myriad observations scholars have made have never been codified and presented as a single argument. By developing a theory out of the many individual observations, Neidorf accomplishes quite a bit for Anglo-Saxon scholarship. First, he provides an explanation for the type of errors that we often find in

manuscripts, which supports the work of editors to propose emendations and provides guidance for what sorts of emendations make the most sense. Second, he shows how analyzing transmission errors, with close attention to how the errors affect both sense and meter, reveals what the scribes knew about language and culture and what information they lacked. Third, this analysis further supports the theory, long held by philologists, that *Beowulf* is an early poem composed in an Anglian dialect. These wide-reaching and interconnected conclusions make Neidorf's work an important book to Old English studies as a whole.

The book consists of an introductory chapter, three subsequent chapters that discuss various types of errors and their significance, a conclusion that expands upon the implications of the types of errors found, an appendix that discusses J. R. R. Tolkien's *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (discussed separately because Neidorf only became aware of it after he completed his manuscript, but which he ultimately finds in accord with his argument), and a glossary. As an introduction, chapter 1 provides an overview of Neidorf's goals and methodology. He starts by detailing the different types of errors that occur; explaining how metrical regularities can provide an objective way to evaluate potential errors and propose possible emendations through statistical data that avoids ethnocentrism; and providing a detailed overview of how these things relate to the major metrical, lexical, semantic, mythological, and paleographical arguments for dating *Beowulf*. As he does so, he explains his method of probabilistic reasoning, which compiles all available evidence and, through induction, posits the simplest explanation for the evidence amassed.

The subsequent chapters each focus on a specific concept by interrogating textual errors in the manuscript. Chapter 2, "Language History," details how discrepancies in the text can often be linked to diachronic or dialectal differences. Neidorf shows that diachronic change affected the manuscript at multiple levels: morphological change introduced errors such as instrumental forms rendered as datives, the use of inflected infinitives, and contracted forms in the place of precontracted ones; lexical change allowed archaic and poetic terms, especially compounds, to be lost through trivialization (an unfamiliar word replaced with a familiar one); and syntactic change caused errors in case endings and function words, since the scribes were unused to the relatively free word order and limited number of prepositions of early Old English. Often such errors can be detected through alliterative or metrical deviations. While some would not credit metrical faults as evidence of an error, Neidorf maintains that it would be a remarkable coincidence for metrical errors to occur so regularly in places where contemporary language is used and for these errors so often to be remedied

simply by rendering the line in an earlier form of the language.

When compared to diachronic changes, dialectal changes are more difficult to identify; because they are often phonological, simply involving the shift of a vowel, they frequently do not create detectable errors. In some cases, however, a change can disrupt the text, as when a dialect difference results in a different syllable length, which affects the meter, or when an Anglian word is rendered as a similar but unrelated West Saxon word, which disturbs the sense. Neidorf also notes that the scribes are guilty of hyper-correction: they change some vowels so often that they seem to have grown accustomed to doing so and change them in different contexts, rendering a different word that, again, does not fit the syntax. As with the errors that relate to diachronic change, any error related to dialect difference could be alleviated by rendering the relevant word in an early Anglian dialect. Thus, the chapter presents a strong argument, according to the inductive method that Neidorf employs, that *Beowulf* is an early Anglian text.

Chapter 3, "Cultural Change," investigates the places in which the scribes seemed to misapprehend cultural references. These references typically relate to names that the scribes seemed not to know, which are consequently subject to obliteration (rendered as common nouns) or obfuscation (used in a form that differs from the original). The types of errors are various, but include replacing the older name "Beow" with the eponymous "Beowulf"; rendering numerous personal names and ethnonyms as kennings; changing the unfamiliar onomastic element "Un-" into the productive "Hun-" in "Unferth"; rendering a name as a similar word, such a *geomer* for *Eomer*; or copying a word with the correct graphemes but irregular spacing, which produced familiar morphemes that lack overall sense. The errors that Neidorf examines in this chapter are particularly diverse, but they all share the motivation of changing an archaic and presumably unrecognized reference into something familiar. Neidorf concludes the chapter by arguing that cultural change is as absolute as language change: once references have been forgotten, they cannot be recovered without research of a type that these scribes would not have had access to. The lack of knowledge, therefore, indicates that the copy of the poem was made after a number of cultural changes took place and that the original was composed much earlier.

Chapter 4, "Scribal Behaviors," moves beyond the *Beowulf* manuscript to discuss how these patterns apply to the other extant manuscripts in the Old English poetic corpus. In particular, Neidorf seeks to disprove the theory, which was first introduced in a restricted context by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe and later expanded, that scribes participated in composing poems because they recast formulae or recomposed lines as they saw

fit. He does so by offering alternate explanations for differences in parallel texts. For texts such as *Daniel/Azarias* and *Soul and Body I/II*, which differ widely in places, Neidorf reviews arguments indicating that one of the versions bears evidence of substantial recomposition by a poet at some point in its history, not just changes at the verse level. For texts such as *Solomon and Saturn* or the *Chronicle* poems, he shows that the differences between the manuscripts are slight and can more logically be explained by lexemic theory. For example, many of the variant words are about the same length and share multiple letters (even when not in the alliterative position) but do not necessarily make equal sense; this situation is much more likely to occur if a scribe was trying to puzzle out the word that was written than if he was freely recomposing. Thus, Neidorf concludes that lexemic theory accounts for manuscript variants better than the idea of recomposition because it provides a more logical explanation of the existing variants and also because it is not an overarching theory that predicts how much variation to expect but rather a theory that explains what occurs on a case-by-case basis.

In his conclusion, Neidorf reviews many of the previously discussed ideas and shows how they support the major claims about *Beowulf* that he argues throughout: that the poem is a unified composition that was not recomposed by scribes as it was transmitted; that the poem is an early composition in an Anglian dialect; and that careful textual editing is an important endeavor, not an arrogant one that disregards the scribes' knowledge of their own language. In making this argument, Neidorf further asserts that any attempt to analyze *Beowulf* in the manuscript context is pointless, since it was not being recomposed at the time. Although I believe that might be overstated (if someone considered it worthwhile to copy and modernize the poem, it must have had some relevance), Neidorf makes the vital stipulation that such an argument can only be valid if it pertains to the poem as it appears in the manuscript, without any of the emendations that have come to be accepted (and while conservative editors may contest some of the emendations found in *Klaeber's Fourth*, they accept many more). It is a poem in which the Jutes are giants, tribal names are confused and conflated, and many characters go unnamed or unrecognized. Because cultural changes obscured many of the references found in *Beowulf*, trying to read them back into an eleventh-century context would be anachronistic and antithetical to understanding the contemporary reception of the poem.

Neidorf's work has the potential to change the current state of the field not just because of the specific findings, which are quite revealing, but also because it shows the continued relevance of philology and textual studies to modern scholarship. Although he can sometimes appear overly dismissive

of opposing arguments, the close attention to detail and inductive reasoning that Neidorf so painstakingly employs supplies convincing evidence about important questions such as the unity and dating of the poem as well as scribal practices and contemporary reception. This type of work can provide a valuable foundation upon which literary scholars could build further arguments, creating synergy between the divergent methodologies.

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