



Foreword

Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe

The publication in 1981 of Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* marked a new stage in the academic history of the poem and its manuscript, though as usually happens with such departures, its significance is more easily recognized in hindsight. In the years since, the controversies generated by the arguments in this book have been enormously productive both for *Beowulf* scholarship and for the discipline in general. And while few books in the subject can claim to provoke engaged discussion for fifteen years after their publication, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* is such a book.

Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript was in 1981, and continues to be, an unsettling book in several ways. To a discipline that values the antiquity of its documents, Kiernan argues many uncomfortable things. While the manuscript had long been recognized to belong to the later end rather than the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period, the text of *Beowulf* had been claimed to be among the earliest of the records of English culture. (Until fairly recently, the prose texts that traveled with it in the Nowell Codex—the *Life of St. Christopher*, the *Wonders of the East*, and the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*—dealing with prodigies and monsters, had received scant notice, and the fragmentary poem *Judith* had received only slightly more.) But *Beowulf*, from the nineteenth century on, had been invested with considerable nationalist pride as an English epic that antedated those of other vernacular cultures, and if the poem dealt with matters Scandinavian, it nonetheless was seen to evince recognizable English national virtues. Indeed, at the moment Tolkien initiates the modern phase of *Beowulf* criticism, removing the appellation “epic” from the poem, he reiterates the investment of the past: “It

[the *pietas* of the poet] would seem to have been part of the English temper in its strong sense of tradition. . . .¹ Such virtue coincided, perhaps not accidentally, with the popular construction of King Alfred as a nation builder, and for many years it seemed only reasonable that the composition of the poem had to antedate the terrible Viking depredations that began in the late eighth century and whose cultural consequences Alfred had tallied in his preface to his translation of the *Regula pastoralis*. In *Beowulf*, then, it seemed possible to trace the earliest moments of what would be England and to hear the voice of one of the earliest of the nation's poets.

Kiernan's book amounts to an attack on every dimension of the picture I have just outlined. The fruits of his sustained examination of the manuscript were a multipronged argument that appears on the face of it simple enough: that the Southwick Codex is a Middle English composite of two late Old English manuscripts; that *Beowulf*, originally produced as a separate booklet, was later added to the prose texts, themselves copied as a separate booklet; that to this composite *Judith* was added later; that the first folio of the dragon section (fol. 179 in the Zupitza foliation—another point in dispute) is a palimpsest executed by the second scribe at some time after the initial writing of the manuscript, a point that revised and extended Tilman Westphalen's 1967 argument; that the dating of the manuscript should be perhaps two decades later than we now accept. Yet simple these arguments are not, and if accepted, they would remove the poem from its traditional interpretative frame.

The radical implications of Kiernan's arguments on the significance of the palimpsest were immediately obvious. Although *Liedentheorie* had had its moment of dissection in the nineteenth-century approach to the poem (to reemerge briefly in certain oral formulaic arguments), in general *Beowulf* scholars have routinely regarded the poem as a unified whole, ascribing to it a poet ("the' *Beowulf* poet") with the full run of poetic virtues in embarrassed lieu of a name. Whatever the usefulness of this practice, it both arises from and reinforces a Romantic reflex to see the text as the product of a single (and extraordinary) poetic mind. The work of that poetic mind, whether ascribed to Northumbria in the Age of Bede or Mercia in the earlier eighth century, was assumed to

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): 245–95 at 266.

have undergone a lengthy history of transmission that accounted for various dialect forms in the predominantly late West Saxon poem and various errors. The history of editing *Beowulf* (whether epitomized in the apparatus of Klaeber's edition or analyzed in its formative stages in Birte Kelly's lengthy study in *Anglo-Saxon England*) is thus in large part a narrative of error and its correction.²

In this context, Kiernan's extended interpretation of the damaged fol. 179 comes as a shock. Rejecting arguments that the overwriting on this folio is the result of freshening up rubbed text, Kiernan instead regards the rubbing as a deliberate act of rewriting. His account of the evidence reads fol. 179 as a boundary between two originally separate poems, joined for the first time by the second scribe of the Nowell Codex. This offer of paleographic support for earlier proposals of a composite text (for example, by Schücking and Magoun) does much more than recast Liederttheorie. Kiernan's proposal makes the scribe a thoughtful and participatory editor/author or, in another way of thinking, displaces the hypothesized poet in favor of the actual scribe. The attention to the pattern of scribal correction elsewhere in the manuscript that Kiernan's reading demands requires a corollary investment in the authority of scribal readings. In a sense, Kiernan's defense of the care taken by the scribes in correcting the manuscript asks that greater probability be assigned to the accuracy of such corrections. But the scribe's ascendancy comes with a price, that being the attendant deflation of the importance of the modern editor. Kiernan's challenge to editors of Old English remains apposite today. Indeed, in the past fifteen years interest in the practices of editing Old English has left the pages of dry-as-dust scholarship for the lively disagreement of conservative and conjectural editors on the conference circuit.³

Perhaps less radical but just as unsettling was Kiernan's bold proposal of a date after 1016 for the making of the poem. This is not to say that the discipline had remained in agreement about an eighth-century

2. Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3d ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950) and Birte Kelly, "The Formative Stages of *Beowulf* Textual Scholarship: Part I," *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983): 247–74 and "The Formative Stages of *Beowulf* Textual Scholarship: Part II," *Anglo-Saxon England* 12 (1984): 239–75.

3. See, for example, D. G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach, eds., *The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994) and Michael Lapidge, "Textual Criticism and the Literature of Anglo-Saxon England" *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 73 (1991): 17–45.

terminus a quo—far from it. In 1980 the University of Toronto hosted a conference on the dating of *Beowulf*, and the volume that issued from it showed an impressive range of opinion, including a number of essays suggesting both relatively late dates and the possibility of friendly feelings (in some parts of England) toward (some) Danes even after the mid-eighth century.⁴ Ker's generally accepted dating for the manuscript is "s. x/xi" though Ker acknowledges that his dating is designed to accommodate a quarter-century error at either end.⁵ For this reason, Kiernan's proposed dating actually falls within the posited limits of Ker's paleographic opinion. Yet Kiernan's argument seems to have been more disturbing than what a twenty-year revision in copying would warrant. Suggesting that the national poem was enthusiastically composed while a Dane had usurped the throne undercut the poem's "English" character not a little, and dating the poem to the reign of Cnut read away more than just the poem's antiquity.

In perhaps no other area, however, has Kiernan's book made so marked a contribution as in forcing us to reexamine the manuscript itself for the information it can offer us. In the aftermath of Kiernan's work on *Beowulf*, it is impossible to be satisfied with traditional readings and resolutions of cruces made from photography or with the unaided eye. If Kiernan's work gives the lie to a cavalier dismissal of the manuscript evidence and its scribes' acumen, it also reminds us that photographic facsimiles can be deceptive, the product of a fairly limited technology. Even the ultraviolet technology available to the Zupitza/Davis facsimile could not go far enough to aid in the resolution of vexed readings, as Kiernan has reemphasized since 1981. Kiernan has continued to break new ground in bringing high-intensity light to bear on the manuscript and, most recently, digital image processing.⁶ His ongoing work on the poem, as editor of the British Library's *e-Beowulf* Project, promises to produce a new kind of edition using digital technology, one that is both diplomatic and pictorial.

Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript situates itself at the focal point of

4. *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

5. N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957, reprinted 1991).

6. See, for example, Kevin S. Kiernan, "Digital Image Processing and the *Beowulf* Manuscript," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 6, no. 1 (1991): 20–27. See also his paper on the *e-Beowulf* project at: <http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/welcome.html>.

traditional philological arguments on the making of a text. Its call to return to the manuscript for evidence, its argument for a radically foreshortened transmission of the text (given Kiernan's advocacy of an eleventh-century combination and editing of earlier narratives), and its attendant emphasis on scribal choice and competence, all ask a revaluation of the accuracy and even usefulness of that most delicate of modern editorial tasks, emendation. In counterpoint (and perhaps despite itself), the book is part of the most current interests in Old English scholarship: its attention to the materiality of text, its disregard of the pieties of the romantic vision of the author, its collapsing of the "author" with the scribe, and its arguing for particular attention to the niceties of scribal versions (and the controversies these positions engendered) opens a space for further work on the poem along a number of poststructuralist lines.

It is a pleasure to greet the timely republication of *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. With its wider availability the book is bound to excite new discussions, new controversies, new partisans, and new objectors. Not only has Kiernan's book begun the conversation on the further life of the poem, it promises to keep it going. And while it is possible to remain in doubt about various inferences Kiernan draws from his evidence, what cannot be doubted is the impact this book has had on *Beowulf* studies. Quite simply, it is impossible to engage *Beowulf* seriously without engaging the arguments Kiernan sets forth in this book. For any work of scholarship that is a remarkable achievement.