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The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded *Beowulf**

Kevin S. Kiernan

To try to dignify my fascination with the *Beowulf* manuscript, I will liken it to Wiglaf's attempt, at the end of the poem, to help Beowulf fight the fire-drake. As a *Beowulf* scholar, I fight like a loyal thane to save the poem from fire-damage and other forms of draconic emendation. In other words, I want to revive an Old English *Beowulf*, the one still surviving in the manuscript. I am depressed by the cosmetics of the mortuary, the neat and tidy but still rather stiff view of *Beowulf* I think we get in modern editions of the poem. What makes me a little nervous about my analogy is that all of Wiglaf's efforts were in vain. Beowulf died, and Wiglaf's whereabouts are unknown. Nonetheless, a modern-day analogous Wiglaf limps among you.

The single surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* is in a hefty composite manuscript known as British Library manuscript Cotton Vitellius A. xv. It is called this because the book was owned by a seventeenth-century antiquary named Sir Robert Cotton who kept track of his manuscripts by their shelf position in bookcases surmounted by the busts of Roman emperors. Thus, Cotton Vitellius A. xv was the fifteenth book on the first shelf of the Vitellius case. If we look inside this big book we find that Cotton bound together two distinct and quite unrelated manuscripts. The first 90 folios are in a twelfth-century handwriting, and we call this part of Cotton's book the Southwick Codex, based on the notice of ownership—actually a chilling curse on anyone who stole the book—on the second folio. The curse appears to have been ineffectual. The remaining 116 folios are copied by two early eleventh-century scribes, and we call this part of Cotton's book the Nowell Codex, because a previous owner, Laurence Nowell, left his name in it in 1563.

The Nowell Codex is the part of Cotton Vitellius A. xv we are

*These remarks were delivered on 9 December 1983 as part of the lecture series in the Gallery of Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

interested in: it contains a fragment of the life of St. Christopher; a couple of treatises (one illustrated) describing the kind of monsters who live in the East; the apocryphal Biblical story of how Judith lopped off the head of Holofernes; and of course the true story of how Beowulf, among other things, lopped off the head of Grendel.

We don't really know exactly when people began to study the poem in modern times. Someone read the *Wonders of the East* in late Middle English times and jotted down a few current spellings between the lines. Perhaps it was Nowell in the sixteenth century who underlined some of the proper names in *Beowulf*, if indeed he ever attempted to read it. But the seventeenth-century table of contents in Cotton's book leaves a blank for *Beowulf*, probably reflecting his librarian's utter bewilderment. The first intelligible reference to the poem was in 1705, when Humfrey Wanley mistakenly described it as a story about Beowulf the Dane who fought with Swedish princes. At any rate the *Beowulf* manuscript survived intact, if virtually untouched, until 1731, when a disastrous fire decimated Cotton's library and left the *Beowulf* manuscript badly scorched along its outer edges.

Wanley's inaccurate description, making our hero a Dane instead of a Geat, can be indirectly credited for preserving a large part of the poem for us. In 1786, Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, an Icelander who worked in Denmark as an archivist, and who eventually became the Danish National Archivist, went to England to find Danish heroes in British archives. He learned about *Beowulf* in Wanley's description, and in 1787 he hired a professional scribe to copy the manuscript for him, and later made a second copy himself. The great value of these two transcripts is that they alone preserve nearly 2000 letters which subsequently crumbled from the scorched edges of the manuscript. Thorkelin used his two transcripts to produce the first edition of the poem in 1815, and all modern editors use them, too, to fill in the gaps in the manuscript.

Ten years before Thorkelin's edition appeared, and exactly one hundred years after Wanley's brief description of the poem, Sharon Turner, in his history of the Anglo-Saxons, took issue with Wanley, saying that his "account of the contents of the manuscript is incorrect. It is a composition more curious and important." Turner should have stopped while he was ahead. He goes on to say, "It is a narration of the attempt of Beowulf to wreck the

fæhthe or deadly feud on Hrothgar, for a homicide which he had committed." Turner was the first scholar to attempt to translate parts of the poem. He came up with the following excerpt from the celebrations after the building of Heorot, Hrothgar's great hall:

There every day
He heard joy
Loud in the hall.
There was the harp's
Clear sound—
The song of the poet said,
He who knew
The beginning of mankind
From afar to narrate.
"He took wilfully
By the nearest side
The sleeping warrior.
He slew the unheeding one
With a club on the bones of his hair."

Turner observantly remarks that "the transition to this song is rather violent, and its subject is abruptly introduced," but less observantly asserts that "unfortunately the injury done to the top and corners of the MS by fire interrupts in many places the connections of the sense." Fortunately the fire-damage to the manuscript is nowhere near as serious as Turner indicates. His main problem, in addition to a very rudimentary understanding of Old English poetry, was that the leaf containing Grendel's attack on Heorot was misplaced in the manuscript when Turner used it. His translation, though, helps illustrate the state of *Beowulf* studies as late as 1805; and Thorkelin's Latin translation confirms that the discipline was not much further along as late as 1815.

Although *Beowulf* now plays a primary role in the history of English language and literature, it has played this role for a shorter time than—say—Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, about as long as the later Romantics. The study of *Beowulf* is, in other words, a relatively young discipline despite its formidably hidebound aspect. English literary history was already well established when *Beowulf* arrived on the scene, and there was no doubt at all where it belonged in the grand scheme. The situation was somewhat like the posthumous publication of Hopkins's poetry in 1918. By then,

scholars had characterized the nature of Victorian verse and it was perfectly clear that Hopkins had no place in the continuum. He became for awhile a twentieth-century poet. I believe this is basically the way *Beowulf* became the earliest English poem.

The situation with *Beowulf* was, of course, far more complicated. It was an international phenomenon, not only the earliest English epic, but the earliest Germanic epic, an ancient record of a Germanic language, and a new window to the pan-Germanic heroic age, through which everyone eagerly peered. They saw Danes and Swedes, Geats and Goths, Angles and Jutes, Franks and Frisians, Finns, Norwegians, Vandals, and more, and heard from them all in an early Germanic dialect then known as Anglo-Saxon. No wonder there was little interest in the unique manuscript, dating perilously near the conquest of Anglo-Saxon England. From the start the manuscript was dismissed as a late, corrupt copy, and scholars set to work trying to reconstruct the ruined original, or what they imagined it to be.

The manuscript was so fully ignored, in fact, that until 1916 scholars with unrelated interests could still refer to the date of the *Beowulf* manuscript as around the year 1000, but to the preceding prose texts, in the same handwriting as the first part of *Beowulf*, as mid-eleventh and even twelfth century. Needless to say, when the mistake was discovered, the eleventh- and twelfth-century dates were quietly moved back to around the year 1000, with a quiet effect on literary history. Scholars had previously thought that two of the prose texts, *The Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, were among the last books written in Late Old English. They thought the new fascination with the East must have been imported from the Continent around the time of the Norman Conquest. Now the Anglo-Saxons had to be interested in this kind of romantic lore much earlier, around the year 1000.

In fact, there is good linguistic evidence to date *Alexander's Letter*, like *Beowulf*, sometime after 1016—that is, after the Danish conquest and during the reign of Cnut the Great. We can apply this evidence to our dating of *Beowulf*. The letter exhibits clear, explicable cases of linguistic change, amelioration of the word *here*, "Danish army," and pejoration of the word *fyrd*, "English army." These words had definite connotations for the Anglo-Saxons. The Bosworth-Toller notes that *here* "is the word which in the Chronicle is always used of the Danish force in

England, while the English troops are always the *fyrð*, hence the word [*here*] is used for *devastation* and *robbery*." The same dictionary refines this statement in volume 2, by adding that "in the annals of the eleventh century *here* is used in speaking of the English." Obviously it lost the connotations of devastation and robbery. The reason for the semantic amelioration is that, after Cnut's accession in 1016, the Danish *here* in word and deed was the English army.

How does this criterion affect our dating of *Alexander's Letter*? Alexander consistently refers to his special Greek forces as a *here*, the equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon "select *fyrð*," and to his combined forces as a *fyrð*, the same as the Anglo-Saxon "great *fyrð*." He notably refers to his enemy's armies as a *fyrð*, the term the Anglo-Saxons reserved for themselves in both senses of the word. In this text, the linguistic pejoration of *fyrð* (the enemy) and amelioration of *here* (the good guys) can only be explained by assuming that the translation was made sometime after 1016, after the Danish conquest. It might well be added that the collocation of a *Greca* (or "Greek") *here*, in the sense of a select imperial guard, received its first historical warrant when Danish Vikings served as a *here* for the Greek emperors in the Varangian guard, which only came into existence in the closing years of the tenth century, just in time for our translation of *Alexander's Letter*.

The usage of *here* in *Beowulf* falls in line with the usage in the *Letter*. Hrothgar's Danes are specifically singled out as a *theod tilu*, "a good nation," because of their readiness for war both at home and in the *here*. In nearly a score of *here*-compounds in *Beowulf*, not one carries a pejorative connotation. By contrast, Beowulf's cowardly thanes, the ones who run away at the end, are called *fyrðgesteallum*, "companions in the *fyrð*." The Anglo-Saxon *fyrð* earned a similar reputation in their late conflicts with the Danes. I mention this case here to allay any nagging doubts you may have that linguistic evidence precludes an early eleventh-century date for *Beowulf*. I have yet to hear of any linguistic evidence showing that *Beowulf* predates its manuscript. The pseudo-evidence always brought forth to bolster an early date is dubious, at best, perhaps because scholars never felt the need to make a strong case for something they deemed self-evident. In any event, the preconceived notions of where *Beowulf* belonged in literary history had a profound effect on the text we read in the editions available today. At first, because of a romantic desire to put *Beowulf* into

the pagan past, scholars had to explain all of the implicitly Christian elements, from Genesis to Doomsday, in the poem. That seemed easy. Christian scribes copied the poem over the centuries, and as they did so they merely interpolated Christian parts in precisely the same style as their pagan source. This theory exploded when scholars began removing the supposed interpolations, leaving behind a poem in little bitty pieces. The only way to put it back together again without seriously disrupting literary history was to move it into the eighth century, as near to the pagan era and as far away from the manuscript as possible.

The move had many apparent advantages. We still had the earliest English epic, the earliest Germanic epic, an ancient record of a Germanic language, and at least a decent view of the pan-Germanic heroic age. So what if the poet was a Christian? At least he only quoted the Old Testament. Some readers, disturbed by the way *Beowulf* grew younger as the years wore on, seized on the absence of references to the New Testament as an indication of the Anglo-Saxons' recent conversion, as if they were first converted to Judaism before being persuaded to switch to Christianity. The real motive, I think, in this line of argument was to root *Beowulf* in the eighth century, where it could not get any younger.

A more gripping argument with the same motive closes off the ninth and tenth centuries, when the Viking invasions traumatized the island. No matter where they sailed from, the Vikings were called Danes by the Anglo-Saxons, and it is hard to imagine a poet during these times creating peace-loving, homebody Danes more interested in sleek architecture than sleek warships. It was not a time to be admiring the stout Sea-Geats, either, those unabashed Vikings who lost their king Higelac in a raid on the Rhineland. As long as Viking raids continued in England, no Anglo-Saxon *scop* in his right mind would chant the opening lines of *Beowulf* before a live, beer-drinking audience: "Yes, we have heard about the glorious deeds of the Spear-Danes of the old days—how those noble ones performed deeds of glory; [how] Scyld Scefing deprived so many people of their beer-halls, terrified men . . . until everyone had to obey him and hand over their money. *That was a good king!*"

Without the ninth and tenth centuries, editors were left with what everyone seemed to want, an early poem and a late manuscript. Editors could still make hundreds of changes in the text on the assumption that the late scribes, through laziness,

ignorance, and indifference, contributed to the hundreds of blunders the poem accumulated as it lumbered through its supposed transmission.

What the editors ignored was that the argument ruling out the ninth and tenth centuries for the composition of the poem also wiped out these centuries for the transmission of the text. If no Anglo-Saxon poet would create the poem, no *scop* recite it, and no audience listen to it, why would ninth and tenth century scribes copy it? The usual scribes of the time were the same monks whose rich monasteries were prime targets of the Vikings. If *Beowulf* is an eighth-century poem, its transmission in Anglo-Saxon times must have been abrupt, from a time when Danes were not synonymous with Viking marauders to a time when they ruled England and thus put a stop to the marauding. The regnal list of Danish Scyldings at the start of *Beowulf* would have been a compliment to Cnut, the latest member of the line, but it is hard to see it as anything other than an insult to any other king of England before him. In the ninth century, King Alfred, who for political reasons seems first to have appropriated Scyld for his line of Anglo-Saxon Scyldings, would not have appreciated the enemy's version in the prologue of *Beowulf*. And at the end of the tenth century, I am sure that Ethelred Unræd would have been ready to include our scribes in the St. Brice's Day massacre if he found out about it.

Using political history to help date the poem early, but not to explain its preservation in a late manuscript, modern editors of *Beowulf* have always assumed that the ninth and tenth centuries participated in a long and complicated transmission of the text, which included corrosive copying through all the main dialect areas. While they agreed that the extant manuscript preserves the poem in more or less standard Late West Saxon, they thought they found the linguistic residue of an ancient, multi-dialectal transmission in one defunct (and in fact imaginary) instrumental reading, an early West Saxon linguistic form here, a Kentish form there, a Mercianism hither, a Northumbrianism yon, with a dash of Saxon *patois* for good measure.

But as scholars have increasingly come to recognize, the mixture of linguistic forms in *Beowulf* is not extraordinary. Most of the archaic forms are part of a poetic word-hoard used also in undoubtedly late poems like *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*. The mixture of cross-dialectal forms shows up in late prose, as well as verse,

and so must be a reflection of copying conventions in some late scriptoria. Keep in mind that Late West Saxon was a literary dialect used throughout England around the year 1000. When it was used in Mercian scriptoria, Mercianisms naturally crept into it; when it was used by a southerner in a Mercian scriptorium, both southern and Mercian features were likely to occur.

Think about our own literary dialect, used throughout the world now regardless of spoken dialects. It contains archaisms like "knight" (Old English *cniht*) and "should" (Old English *scolde*), Scandinavianisms like "they" (Old English *hi*), "are" (Old English *sind* or *beoth*), "give" (Old English *gifan*), and "skirt" (Late Old English *scyrte*), as well as a rich mixture of cross-dialectal forms, including those from other ancient and modern languages. A writer with a Mississippi accent today communicates in writing, at least, with readers in the Bronx. Yet even today some spellings differ from center to center. In Binghamton the word "center" in Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies ends in "-er," while across the border in Toronto the same word in Centre for Medieval Studies ends in "-re." Across the same *campus*, at the Pontifical Institute of Mediæval Studies, the word at the Centre spelled "medieval" is at the Institute spelled "mediæval," another non-native archaism. In short, if we wanted to, we could use the same linguistic criteria used to date *Beowulf* early to create long and complicated transmissions for texts written the day before yesterday in North America. Throw in an Eastern Kentucky scribe with a sense of humor and he might add an Old English relic like "hit," standard English "it," for us to ponder.

My first interest in the *Beowulf* manuscript had nothing to do with the date of the poem. I accepted the conventional dating. I only wanted to read the poem in its Old English version, freed from all of the modern emendations. In my view, modern editors had done to *Beowulf* precisely what they had accused the eighth, ninth, and tenth-century scribes of doing. They created a new poem from an ancient source. But whereas the editors could only imagine their pristine source emanating from the misty moors of prehistoric times, I had a hard copy of my ancient source in a photographic facsimile, and the ancient source itself at the British Library, on a misty but well-travelled street in modern London.

For a long time, the facsimile alone served my purposes. I was mainly interested in verifying manuscript readings where the editions I used had changed them. I will try to give you some idea

of the range of these editorial changes without driving you outside or into the arms of Morpheus. I want to show you, in particular, how seemingly innocuous emendations, based on alliteration and meter, have far-reaching consequences.

Theories about Old English prosody, the art of versification, invariably join forces with theories about the date of the poem to justify emendations. As you perhaps know, the Old English verse line is divided in two main parts, called an on-verse and an off-verse. Each half-line has two heavily stressed syllables and a variable number of less heavily stressed or unstressed ones. Sophisticated metrical studies have revealed that there are only five main patterns, or types, of metrical stress in the half-lines, though these types are by no means as regular as the iambs, trochees, dactyls, and anapests of later English poetry. The two half-lines of *Old English* poetry are linked by alliteration, which can occur on the first or second stress (or both) of the on-verse, but only on the first stress of the off-verse, that is, on the third stress of the full line. So for a line of Old English verse you cannot have "Peter Piper picked a peck," but only "Peter Piper picked a bushel," "Ethelred Piper picked a bushel," or "Peter Cnutsson picked a bushel."

The problem is that not all of the lines in *Beowulf*, which was used to establish the rules of Old English prosody, follow these rules. Sometimes there is no alliteration; sometimes there are three stresses in a half-line; sometimes there is only a half-line and sometimes there are three instead of two; rather often an atypical metrical type surfaces. These aberrations naturally offend the sensibilities of metrists and alliterationists, and with all of the positive evidence they have amassed they have generally been able to persuade editors to get rid of the few bits of negative evidence.

According to the rules, any vowel can alliterate with any other vowel, but a particular consonant (including *h*) is strictly bound to alliterate only with itself. The fact that words beginning with *h* often alliterate with words beginning with vowels in *Beowulf* is a sure sign, according to the rules, of scribal corruption. But the relentless application of this rule may be hiding some linguistic evidence from us. We would say that the alliterative phrase "honest Abe" alliterates vocally with the phrase "heir apparent," but not with the phrase "hairy head." "Hairy head" alliterates for me with "humble Harry," but for some English speakers "umble 'arry" alliterates with "honest Abe." In late Old

English times the quality of *h* was protean, too. That's how Hrothgar and Hrothulf ultimately became Roger and Ralph.

Emending this kind of evidence out of existence can have a major impact on our interpretation of the poem. According to our modern editions, there is a character in the poem named *Unferth*, whose name, the editors tell us, means "mar-peace" (*un* means "not" and *ferth*, actually *frith*, means "peace"). It seems like a good name for the troublemaker who quarrels with Beowulf on his first night in Heorot. One wonders, though, why his parents named him *Unferth*. Elaborate interpretations have evolved making the character an allegorical representation of Discord or Dissension. Yet the name that four times appears in the editions as *Unferth* appears four times in the manuscript as *Hunferth*, a fairly common name in the Anglo-Saxon period. The first time it appears in *Beowulf*, the name begins a new section of the poem, and here the scribe went to special trouble drawing a large, unusually ornate, capital *H* for it. Are we to suppose that an ignorant, lazy scribe made such a self-confident and industrious change, and kept his eye peeled for the three additional *uncapitalized* cases as he copied? As we have seen, the name *Hunferth* may have been pronounced " 'unferth" in Old English times, but neither the poet nor his audience would be likely to interpret the pronunciation, just as we would not be inclined to interpret Cockney " 'arry" to mean "light as air, delicate, or graceful."

Consider another far-reaching emendation involving alliteration. A line lacking it occurs in the manuscript at the point where Beowulf is greeted at Heorot. In the on-verse, the first half-line, Hrothgar tells his messenger to say that Beowulf and his men are welcome by *Denia leodum*, "the people of the Danes." In the off-verse, the second half-line, *Word inne abead*, "he brought the message in." Editors have supplied the missing alliteration by creating a modern "Old English" off-verse to alliterate with the real Old English on-verse, and a modern "Old English" on-verse to alliterate with the authentic Old English off-verse. The most influential modern interpolation now reads, *tha to dura eode widcuth hæleth*, "then the famous warrior went to the door"—and brought the message in. While the manuscript forgiveably ignores the movements of the messenger, the editor puffs his walk to the door into epic proportions. In view of the high stakes, we ought to be able to tolerate a few lines in *Beowulf* that lack alliteration. Here the allure of alliteration allots a line of modern Old English

to the poem. Some *Beowulf* scholars, who believe that the number of verse-lines in the poem was of special significance to the poet, have even been including such modern interpolations in their calculations.

The metrists, like their cohorts the alliterationists, believe that an *ur-text* of *Beowulf* once existed whose meter unalterably followed their rules. As one metrist says in the opening sentence of his book, "Metrical studies of ancient poetry have at least two immediate aims, the establishment of the text and the recovery of the pleasure inherent in verse." Metrists, to put it in a more skeptical way, aim to emend the manuscript. Their emendations, moreover, are circuitously linked to the belief in an early date for the poem, since the manuscript readings they change undermine their rules. Thus they change by deletion the off-verse in line 9, *thara ymbsittendra*, "of the neighboring peoples," to *ymbsittendra*, "of neighboring peoples," because *thara* ("the") would not be used in this way, they claim, in *early* poetry.

A final example of how metrical theory and dating theory converge and collaborate can be seen in the on-verse of line 6. The manuscript reads *egsode eorl*, "terrified the man," but singular *eorl* is routinely emended to plural *eorlas* ("men") or to the proper name *Eorle* (ironically enough, "the ancient tribe of Erulians") because the metrical rules demand an unstressed syllable after it. However, if we do not change the manuscript, the word *eorl* may be seen as a roughly datable anachronism. Old English *eorl* took on the meaning of Danish *jarl* in Anglo-Saxon England after the Danish invasions, and survives today in the modern title of Earl. Another plausible case occurs later in the poem in the phrase, *eorl Ongenthio*, in reference to a king of the Swedes. Parts of what is now Sweden were ruled by Cnut's Danish *jarls* at the time of the *Beowulf* manuscript. In the context at the beginning of the poem, Scyld Scefing, among troops of his enemies, deprived many tribes of their meadhall benches, but his final victory was that he *egsode eorl*, terrified the ruling chief, or petty king.

The desired meter for the phrase can be achieved, moreover, without resorting to emendation by pronouncing *eorl* in two syllables—*eor-el*. We all know people who say both "athlete" and "ath-e-lete," or "twirl" and "twir-el" to cite a current "r-l" example, and distinguished poets have been known to use side-by-side such forms as "Canterbry" and "Canterbury," "alarm" and "alarum," "sprite" and "spirit," solely on the dictates of meter. The *Beowulf*

poet uses, for example, *Dena* beside *Denia*, along with a host of other metrical variants.

In the light of this kind of evidence, I am not persuaded by the metrists' contention that certain contractions in *Beowulf* prove that the poem is early. True enough, in the old days the whiskey, Scotch, was Scottish and the people, Welsh, were Wealshish. But there is reason to believe that speakers of Late Old English would have naturally pronounced the contractions in *Beowulf* in two syllables, rather than one, despite the conventional spellings, particularly if the meter encouraged them to do so. There are only a few such contracted forms in *Beowulf* and one explanation can serve for all.

In Old English the ending for all verbs in the infinitive form was *-an*, but at an early stage the stem of the verb *do* (our "do") had contracted with this ending to produce the form *don* instead of *doan*. But native speakers would have recognized by analogy with all the other infinitives that this was a contraction. Native speakers of modern English recognize, with much less linguistic reinforcement, that "don't" is a contraction of "do not." We know, moreover, that in late Old English times the old pronunciation survived or revived in some dialects, for uncontracted spellings like *doan* re-emerge in some late texts, if not in *Beowulf*.

Remember, though, that the *Beowulf* manuscript is written in the standard late West Saxon literary dialect, and that its spellings do not necessarily reflect the pronunciations of non-West Saxon poets. Note that today in formal prose we always write "do not" even where we would naturally say "don't." If *Beowulf* is a late poem, the poet may well have decided to use what he perceived was a conservative spelling instead of a provincial one, since he knew that the word would be pronounced correctly in any case. Our standard literary dialect gives us an old, conservative spelling for the number 2, "t-w-o," but everyone I know now pronounces it "too," not "two."

My quarrel (or quar-rel) with the metrists is not with their aim to recover the pleasures inherent in verse. They have surely hit the target, if not the bull's-eye, in their analyses. I think they are right that the few contractions in *Beowulf* usually need to be decontracted to sound like verse. I think they are quite wrong to assume that contractions thereby prove that *Beowulf* is an early poem preserved in a late, corrupt manuscript. My quarrel with them, with most textual critics of the poem, and with all modern

editors of it, is their common aim to establish the text by making emendations to fit their theories.

I was content to believe that *Beowulf* is an early poem preserved in a late, *reliable* manuscript, until I studied the manuscript at first hand at the British Library. What I found there was a hoard of evidence that had never been mentioned, much less taken into account, by the metrists, the textual critics, and the editors. Before giving you an inventory of its extraordinary features, I need to tell you why the *Beowulf* manuscript looks the way it does today. The fire of 1731 destroyed Cotton's binding and left the outside edges of the manuscript crumbled and charred. In short, the fire had left behind what was essentially a big stack of separate vellum leaves, rather than a book. In the middle of the nineteenth century, in 1845 to be exact, the officials at the British Museum decided to rebind *Beowulf* and the other manuscripts of Cotton Vitellius A. xv, to make the stack of leaves a book again.

The officials realized that they could not simply slap a new cover around the stack and call it a book. Skilled bookbinders had to connect the leaves somehow, to recreate gatherings that could then be stitched together in a conventional binding. Moreover, they had to come up with a way to protect the charred, crumbling edges of the vellum. The method they decided on was to mount each vellum leaf in a paper frame and to bind the paper frames. For each leaf they made a tracing on heavy paper and cut the center out, leaving a retaining space of 1-2mm around the edge. They put paste in this retaining space and then carefully pressed the vellum leaf into place. To secure the leaf from the front, they then pasted transparent strips around the edges. When the work was done they bound the paper frames in a brown-calf facsimile of the original covers.

The new binding was a triumph of book preservation, for it stopped the crumbling of the vellum in its tracks. However, I think it is fair to say that the binders were more interested in the outside appearance of the book than with the inside preservation of the text and the physical features of its original manuscript. The retaining space of the paper frames covers hundreds of letters of the text. Moreover, the decision to mount each leaf separately meant that any vestige of the original vellum gatherings had to be sacrificed.

In 1882, Julius Zupitza attempted to record all of the covered letters for his facsimile edition by holding the manuscript up to the

light. He did a great job for someone working before the days of the light bulb. In the summers of 1982 and 1983 I used fiber-optic light to check his work and found few mistakes, but over 300 letters and letter-fragments he had been unable to see. It is symptomatic of the general neglect of the *Beowulf* manuscript that no one bothered to verify Zupitza's claims for a hundred years. And no one had ever tried to reconstruct the original gatherings of the *Beowulf* manuscript from any scraps of physical evidence that might remain of them.

Any medieval manuscript, quite apart from the texts it preserves, tells a unique story. There are no two alike. Before *Beowulf* could slay his monsters, someone had to slay a lot of sheep. It was a costly proposition to copy a poem of the length of *Beowulf*, and someone had to believe that it was worth a small flock of sheep, and a large flock of precious time and labor. Once the sheep were slaughtered and skinned, the hides had to be washed, limed, unhaired, scraped, dried, washed again, stretched on frames, scraped again to remove blemishes, smoothed and polished with pumice, softened with chalk, and cut to size. When the prepared sheets of vellum finally went to the scriptorium, more work had to be done before any copying could begin. Someone, presumably the scribe, had to rule the sheets of vellum for lines of text and margins, and arrange the sheets in small booklets called gatherings. The usual gathering at this time was made up of four folded sheets, providing eight leaves or sixteen pages to write on.

The way booklets were put together in manuscripts sometimes tells us something worth knowing about the intended use of the texts. For example, in manuscripts of homilies, scribes often copied separate texts in single gatherings, small, irregular, self-contained units that could be removed from the manuscript for use in preaching. Though the original gatherings of the *Beowulf* manuscript were permanently obscured by the fire and the new binding, anyone with my blind faith in this manuscript wanted to hear its hidden secrets. Part of its story was buried in those original gatherings.

My approach was to collect any extraordinary manuscript evidence that had been overlooked, ignored, or forgotten. For instance, I had to determine for each vellum leaf which side was the hair (or wool) side and which side was the flesh side of the animal skin. If I was going to reconstruct the original gatherings, I could not deduce an original sheet that had hair on one side of its

fold and flesh on the other.

I also had to make sure that the scribal rulings lined up properly. The scribes ruled the vellum for lines of text and margins a gathering at a time. First, they punched tiny holes through the stacked sheets of a gathering along both sides for lines of text, and along the top and bottom for the margins. Then they drew the lines with a ruler and an awl, using the holes as guide-marks. Although these guide-marks were destroyed in the fire, the writing-grids they helped create of course still survive. The awl left rulings in the form of furrows, or indentations, which show up in reverse on the other side of the sheet. I could not come up with a sheet that had furrows on one side of the fold and reversed markings on the other. Nor could I come up with a sheet that had 20 rulings on one side of the fold and 22 on the other, since the same sheet would have had the same number of guide-marks for the rulings.

By this simple process, I was able to establish the most probable construction of the original gatherings and definitely eliminate some alternatives that once had seemed more likely. I discovered that the two scribes of *Beowulf* had constructed their gatherings in completely different ways. The first scribe had made 4-sheet gatherings, ruled (with one exception) for 20 lines of text, and had consistently arranged his sheets with hair sides facing hair sides and flesh sides facing flesh sides, to obscure the contrast when the book was opened at any point. This arrangement was typical for early eleventh-century manuscripts. But the second scribe had made 5-sheet gatherings, ruled for 21 lines of text, and had invariably arranged his sheets with hair sides facing flesh sides, as if to highlight the contrast between hair and flesh wherever the book was opened in his part. It is a striking change in format.

Knowing this kind of information can have important consequences. I believe, for example, that I have been able to identify another manuscript from the same scriptorium on the basis of striking paleographical and codicological similarities. The manuscript is the famous Blickling Homilies codex in the Scheide collection at Princeton. A paleographical connection was noted long ago, but no one ever noticed that the *Beowulf* manuscript and the Blickling Homilies manuscript share the same odd features in the sheet arrangement of the gatherings and that the size of the writing grids are virtually identical. What makes this discovery so exciting to me is that it explains in the best possible way why the description of Grendel's mere is so like the description of Hell in

Blickling Homily 16. The *Beowulf* poet had access to this manuscript of homilies, which is dated internally in the year 971. *Beowulf* must have been composed after that.

You can understand, then, my interest in the original gatherings of the *Beowulf* manuscript. Through my analysis of the sheet arrangement, I learned that the make-up of the first gathering in *Beowulf* was extraordinary. In 1705, when the original gatherings were still intact, Wanley had told us that *Beowulf* began a separate manuscript, but later scholars preferred to think that the poem had been copied continuously with the prose texts that precede it, and that copying of the poem began in the middle of the last prose gathering. Since they had no evidence to contradict Wanley, I think these scholars wanted to believe that *Beowulf* was copied mechanically and that its manuscript was in no way special to the scribes. The hair and flesh arrangement of the leaves supported Wanley's statement, while the rulings from the *Beowulf* leaves did not line up properly with rulings on the relevant prose leaves.

There is a good deal of corroborating evidence that the first page of *Beowulf* originally served as an outside cover. I will mention only one aspect of this evidence. The page shows unmistakable signs of unusual wear and tear that cannot be attributed to exposure in modern times. Most of the damage is in the lower right corner, where some of the text has worn off and is no longer legible. It looks like the result of excessive handling, as if the book had been repeatedly held by the corner. The damage presumably occurred in Old English times, since Wanley, in his transcript of the first page, copied one of the partly illegible words as it now appears and then stopped transcribing when he reached the other illegible words. The Thorkelin transcripts unequivocally show that the damage was as advanced in 1787 as it is now.

There was inarguable evidence, in addition, that the last page of *Beowulf* had also served as an outside cover, making the manuscript what appeared to be a special, self-contained unit. The most obvious evidence was that the scribe had to use a plethora of abbreviations in order to squeeze in the last lines of the poem on this page; that he later had to freshen up the ink where readings had worn off; and that a medieval bookworm feasted on the last pages of *Beowulf* before the *Judith* fragment became part of the codex.

To make a long lecture somewhat shorter, I found some remarkable things going on in this newly separate, special

manuscript. Those ignorant, lazy scribes had both carefully proofread their work and had made nearly 200 corrections of their mistakes. I can't believe they overlooked up to 350 additional mistakes, about one every ten lines, as the modern editions maintain. The second scribe had even proofread the first scribe's work, and in addition to making some corrections had made a few minor emendations. There was no comparable evidence of proofreading, by either of the scribes, in the prose texts. This convincingly proved that the scribes, in their work on *Beowulf* at any rate, were neither ignorant nor lazy, that they well understood what they were copying and that they worked uncommonly hard to provide a reliable text.

But there were more remarkable things going on. The second scribe, who took over copying in the middle of one of the first scribe's gatherings, ostentatiously ignored the rulings on four consecutive pages and between the first and last rulings adroitly inserted more lines of text than the rulings provided for. To appreciate his feat, try doing it yourselves in a lined notebook. In the immediately preceding gathering, the first scribe, who always ruled his gatherings for 20 lines of text, suddenly ruled one for 22 lines, before resuming his normal format. The second scribe, after squeezing in those extra lines in the first scribe's gathering, used a totally different format for his own gatherings, with more sheets, more lines of text per page, and wider margins.

The first leaf of his first gathering was a full palimpsest—that is, the original text on it had been completely eradicated, and a new, shorter text, written in a slightly different script with a few strange spellings, had replaced it. Parts of it were later erased, and a full restoration was never achieved. On the reverse side of the second leaf three lines had been deliberately erased, with no attempt to replace or restore them. In the midst of all of these remarkable features, the first scribe, who numbered the sections of the poem after copying them, introduced an error in the number sequence. The second scribe sometimes forgot to leave space for numbers in his part, but otherwise continued numbering his sections based on the first scribe's erroneous sequence.

It all seemed like the *locus Anglo-Saxonicus* of the right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing, or the mental breakdown of a schizophrenic manuscript. All of the traumas were clustered at the breaking point, where one scribe abruptly (in the middle of a verse) stopped copying and the second took over.

Moreover, they were all clustered in the section of the text known as "Beowulf's Homecoming," a loose transition that fuses the story of Beowulf's youthful exploits in Denmark with the story of his confrontation as an old man with the dragon in Geatland.

For me, all of the evidence led to an unorthodox but seemingly inescapable conclusion. Two separate stories and two separate manuscripts had been linked together in the same manuscript that has come down to us from the early eleventh century. The *Beowulf* manuscript was not a late copy of an early poem, but a revision-in-progress of a contemporary one. It was not planned in advance, to judge by the sudden breakdown in the format.

Both scribes copied parts of the new transitional text. The first scribe stopped where he did to go back and supply his share of the revision in the preceding gathering. The length of the new text did not permit him to use his normal-sized gathering ruled for 20 lines to the page. He was thus obliged to rule it for 22 lines to the page. If part of his new transition had deleted a former section of the poem it would explain how he messed up the number sequence. He recopied the old numbers, not remembering that one of the old numbers was now gone. Since the second scribe often forgot to leave space for numbers, it follows that he had no numbers to miscopy from his exemplar. This deduction explains why he innocently resumed the number sequence where the first scribe had erroneously left off. The second scribe, moreover, was obliged to squeeze in extra lines of text, in disregard of the rulings, because he had already copied the last two gatherings, containing the dragon episode. It was not easy to link up two completely different stories in two different manuscripts.

The palimpsest suggests that the second scribe many years later decided that the transition was not as it should be. After erasing all of the original text on the first folio (front and back) of the dragon episode, and three related lines on the reverse side of the next folio, he provided a new start for this episode. The current state of the text on this page indicates that it was still in a draft stage when the poem's Old English history came to a sudden halt. It is well to remember that at this time Anglo-Saxon *history* was about to come to a sudden halt, too. The poem remains unfinished on this folio to this day, making the manuscript, at least in part, an early eleventh-century record of an early eleventh-century poem.