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Celts in Hiding: The Search for Celtic Analogues in "Beowulf"

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CELTS IN HIDING:
THE SEARCH FOR CELTIC ANALOGUES IN *BEOWULF*

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Vincent Passanisi

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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DEDICATION

To Allison and Sam

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine literary criticism that finds parallels between Celtic literature and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. Many Celtic scholars have argued that because *Beowulf* relies on a great deal of Celtic literary and oral material, it would be better understood if examined in a Celtic context. These Celtic scholars assert that they are responding to what they see as German chauvinism on the part of Anglo-Saxon scholars who state that *Beowulf* is undeniably a Germanic poem.

This study demonstrates that the argument for Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* depends upon a myth of Celtic identity that can be traced to Matthew Arnold, who appropriated Celtic literary characteristics in order to explain certain characteristics of English culture, and to achieve British national and cultural unity. Arnold describes the Celts as a sentimental people who have a penchant for "beauty, charm, and spirituality." This myth of Celtic identity can be traced through the various critical works that attempt to prove that *Beowulf* depends on Celtic material. In twentieth-century criticism, the myth of Celtic identity was transformed when some scholars came to see Celtic material as an undercurrent in Anglo-Saxon thought.

Attempting to make up for a lack of substantive historical evidence for Celtic influence in *Beowulf*, scholars such as James Carney, Charles Donahue, and Martin Puhvel sought to reveal how the Celtic literary elements were hidden in the text of the poem. These scholars believed that the explicit Germanic content of the poem obscured the themes and narrative events that had their true origin in Celtic culture.

This study explains how Celtic analogues came to be used as evidence for interaction between the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic cultures during the first millennium, and explains why such literary parallels fail to adequately illustrate that interaction.

CELTS IN HIDING: THE SEARCH FOR CELTIC ANALOGUES IN

BEOWULF

Attempting to illuminate the perplexing Old English poem *Beowulf*, many scholars have compared it to Celtic literature, arguing that previous insistence on a Germanic origin of the poem has unnecessarily obscured a meaning that becomes clear— even obvious—once the poem is placed in its proper Celtic context, as if *Beowulf* were the lost piece of some vast puzzle finally laid in its proper place. These scholars have pursued a variety of parallels between the poem and Celtic texts: literary, linguistic, folkloric, historical, social, economic, political, and otherwise. The variety of interpretive approaches used by scholars would seem to indicate a viable link between the poem and Celtic literature. Yet this Celtic scholarship—which purports that the *Beowulf* poem depends heavily upon Celtic material—attempts to support with extant literary evidence a historical connection that is difficult to prove since the social, political, and economic relationship that existed between Saxon and Celt[1] represents one of the darkest areas of historical knowledge we possess. The argument that *Beowulf* possesses Celtic roots almost always rests on the assumption that the relationship between the native Celts and the newly-settled Anglo-Saxons was unequivocally based on economic, social, and monastic interaction. It implies that the people of these cultures knew each other's language, traded goods with each other, and relied on each other for many of their day-to-day needs. This is, however, an argument that is clearly circular, for many recent scholars have asserted that the only definitive proof for this relationship lies in the Celtic character of Old English texts.

In order to make credible the claim that *Beowulf* was somehow related to Celtic literature, scholars, besides asserting that Celts and Angles shared aspects of their

cultures, had to overcome long-standing biases held by Anglo and American critics who stated that the historical development of Celtic literature during the Middle Ages was remote from that of English literature. Celtic scholars maintained that the insistence that *Beowulf* was strictly a Germanic text was the result of chauvinism by Anglo-Saxon scholars who refused to consider evidence to the contrary because they believed that Celtic literature was whimsical and therefore, inferior. Once the prejudice against Celtic literature was dismantled, Celticists felt, it would be a seemingly simple task to demonstrate how Celtic elements constitute an undercurrent in Anglo-Saxon—or more generally, English—thought and literature. But no hard literary and historical evidence existed and so scholars chose to assume that the Celtic literary elements found in any Anglo-Saxon text, specifically *Beowulf*, always resided in the "background". In *Beowulf*, the Celtic elements found by scholars tended to be aesthetic, obscure, internal, or oblique; they were never self-evident. These Celtic scholars believed that the Celtic elements contributed rarely if ever to the major plot, characters, or themes, but instead were hidden, obscured by the predominant—because explicit—Anglo-Saxon characteristics of *Beowulf*. Because the Celtic characteristics were not explicit, it was easy for Anglo-Saxon scholars to subordinate them to those explicit elements which supported a Germanic origin for the poem. This subordination of Celtic elements was the result of their association with previous stereotypical claims that Celtic literature was somehow more spiritual and magical than Anglo-Saxon literature. Celtic literature, characterized as fantastic, came to be seen as less important than Germanic literatures with their seemingly strong historical roots. It was these stereotypes (of both Celtic and Germanic literature) that allowed some scholars to claim, despite evidence to the contrary, that *Beowulf* was surreptitiously Celtic in theme, tone, and content. Thus, although Celtic critics seek to destroy negative stereotypes about the Celts, their arguments rest upon a reoccurring myth of Celtic identity.

Although the idea of a Celtic *Beowulf* might seem ludicrous to some, it is the ill-defined origin of the poem that has allowed such theories to abound. With more than a hundred years of *Beowulf* scholarship behind us, we still lack clear evidence concerning the origin of the poem. We continue to ask the same questions—so necessary to an interpretation—and are unable to answer them satisfactorily: Who composed the poem? Is it a written creation, the work of a single "author," or an oral composition, the product of countless generations of *scopas*? Was it composed at a time contemporary to its being written down in manuscript form, or was it originally penned in the Age of Bede and later copied into its eleventh-century[2] manuscript? The answers to these questions provide the basic assumptions to any interpretation of *Beowulf* and position that interpretation amid an increasingly complex array of Beowulfian criticism.

Beowulf continues to be the centerpiece of Anglo-Saxon studies, despite the advent of deconstructive and revisionist theories which have done much to discredit—or at least weaken confidence in—past scholarship on the poem. Newer critical approaches focus not so much on the poem itself as on the history of criticism, specifically on the way each era's interpretation is shaped by the cultural elite who assert their ideology as the dominant one. The new approaches assume that all modes of inquiry are politically motivated, even those which are self-consciously reflexive (my own argument certainly fits this description). Allen Frantzen, in his recent book, *Desire for Origins*, has demonstrated that ideology has had a long reign in Anglo-Saxon studies. He argues: "The reception of the Anglo-Saxon past records the invention of Anglo-Saxon studies to serve the ideological ends of leaders in English culture and education" (124).[3] Such invention continues into the present, as the field of Anglo-Saxon studies is constantly being re-invented, but has a long history. During the reign of Elizabeth I, Archbishop Matthew Parker, John Joscelyn, and others "believed that Aelfric's writings upheld Anglican eucharistic beliefs" (Leinbaugh 52) thus justifying the English church's break

with Rome. As Theodore Leinbaugh notes, "Anglican theologians seized upon Aelfric's [Sermon on the Sacrifice on Easter Day] as ancient evidence against the doctrine of transubstantiation" (51). Religion, politics, education: all policies could find justification in Anglo-Saxon texts. Frantzen wishes to expose the ideological agendas of earlier scholars whose philological work—he insists—must continue but under the auspices of a new guard of literary scholars, ever vigilant against the use of ideological agendas.

In recent years, then, as a result of critiques like Frantzen's, much *Beowulf* criticism has come to be seen as arbitrary and relative, the text being the only constant. And even the text can be called into question when it becomes evident, upon consultation of the unique manuscript, that any translation, any edition, any electronic image is also an interpretation. Such relativism topples the poem from any stable platform upon which it could possibly rest. The use of a translation complicates the matter of interpretation, because it then becomes a matter of interpreting an interpretation; and those who would read the original are biased by their choice of edition; "Since editors must interpret, editors of *Beowulf* who confront its numerous ambiguities are doing what editors are supposed to do. They are making informed choices for their readers" (Frantzen 172). Fred Robinson has demonstrated that even the accepted Klaeber edition is not without an ideological twist.[4] Perhaps the only way to remedy the reliance on an edition is if every scholar had access to the actual manuscript. Kevin Kiernan's Electronic Beowulf Project, which gives scholars access to the manuscript through digitized pictures, is a noble endeavor since the use of computers has, to a degree, helped to consolidate and renew Beowulf studies; but we will certainly find that even such an undertaking is not disinterested, and only time will reveal the biases and inconsistencies associated with electronic media.

Perhaps nowhere in *Beowulf* studies are the ideological allegiances of editors and critics stronger than in that group of scholars who consider the poem's relationship to

Celtic texts and culture. The school that finds Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* is small indeed, but the field functions as a complete microcosm of Beowulfian, even Anglo-Saxon studies. Comparisons between *Beowulf* and Celtic texts have been made on philological, cultural, historical, nominal, and social grounds. The diversity of perspectives and methodologies in the works that find Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* makes them difficult for one to analyze. They are a diffuse group, constituting a hubbub[5] of voices that agree on little else other than that Celtic writers and thinkers influenced Anglo-Saxon ones.

The process by which this criticism developed was two-fold. First, in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, belles-lettristic Anglo critics who wished to see a politically unified Britain proposed a homogenous yet rich British culture, one that would possess the qualities associated with each of the disparate insular cultures: English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish. Beginning with Matthew Arnold—whose ideas I will discuss in greater detail below—these critics subordinated Celtic culture to Anglo-Saxon culture by associating it with previously established literary stereotypes (an association made not unwittingly).[6] These critics confused Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literary characteristics with cultural characteristics. Relying on early characterizations of Celtic literature, they suggested that the Celts, like their texts, were illogical, magical, fantastic, and imaginative; that they were fierce lovers of nature and beauty; and that they were an aesthetic people with a tendency toward the obscure. This description was contrary to the stereotypical view that the "Germanic" English held of themselves: a people who were logical, sober, and predictably determined. Critics argued that since the irrational or the fantastic is never a purely Germanic trait of the English, when present in the English it must be a quality they inherited when their Anglo-Saxon ancestors commingled with the Celts they were supplanting. For those Englishmen who were staunch defenders of their Saxon ancestry and who deplored any purported connection between themselves and

their Celtic brethren, such a connection was like the genes of an illicit relationship in the attic of one's genealogy, it was something one wanted to keep hidden. Some scholars would insist that the Saxons were not conscious of a Celtic influence, but the influence was discernible in Anglo-Saxon literature nonetheless. It was discernible as an undercurrent of tone, theme, style, all of which were obscured by the explicit Anglo-Saxon characteristics of the literature, as an element of whimsical beauty illuminating stern Germanic moralism. This ethnographic stereotype of Celtic cultural elements was necessary if the racially-biased English culture was to accept a new definition of itself: a homogenous cultural unit (British) containing distinctive insular elements (English, Welsh, Irish, Scottish). In order to educate the English about their new heritage, critics promoted the study of Celtic literature and languages.

Second in the development of this criticism, Celtic scholars who practiced a purportedly more scientific philological scholarship used the assumptions of earlier belles-lettristic critics—assumptions which had come to be regarded as fact—to support their own desire to wrest *Beowulf* from its well-established classification as a Germanic poem. *Beowulf*, the centerpiece of Anglo-Saxon poetry, symbolized the origins of English literature and explicitly illustrated the heroic values of Anglo-Saxon society. If *Beowulf* could be shown to be Celtic, it would give the study of Celtic literature and languages a much needed boost. Yet Celtic scholars had difficulty proving—despite the variety of arguments—that the connection between *Beowulf* and Celtic literature was a credible alternative to criticism that places the poem in a Germanic context. This is because the characters and setting (Danish and Geatish) of the poem are so overtly Germanic, a fact that forced Celtic scholars to posit an implicit, more obscure link based usually on the Grendel scenes, which were in line with notions that Celtic literature was often fantastic and supernatural. They sought to convince Anglo-Saxon scholars that the Celts influenced the Anglo-Saxons almost subconsciously: Anglo-Saxon literature

retained its distinct Germanic character, but belied a signature Celtic trace.

Regardless of their methodologies, assumptions, or conclusions concerning the nature of Celtic influence, all scholars who declare the existence of Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* find beneath the sturdy Saxon exterior, a Celtic heart. What better testament to the authenticity of Celtic studies than proof that the touchstone of Anglo-Saxon culture was really Celtic in nature? At stake was not merely the origin of an ancient poem, but the cultural heritage of Great Britain.

During the nineteenth century, racial prejudice in England came to be justified by the rise of new sciences: anthropology, ethnology, phrenology, and philology seemingly confirmed what was already known, that the origins of English society could be found in the Germanic Anglo-Saxons, not in the insular Celts known as the Britons. According to historian Hugh MacDougall, these sciences mistakenly conflated racial characteristics with cultural ones, confusing the linguistic, intellectual, and physical attributes of the people they studied: "The pages of learned reviews, such as the *Journal of the Ethnological Society* and its rival *The Anthropological Review*, bristled over the physical and psychological differences which marked the Teuton off from the Celt, the Negro, the Eskimo" (123). Ethnology, a science initially linked to anthropology, sought to classify men according to their racial characteristics, and gave birth to such pseudo-sciences as phrenology, which postulated that mental capacity, linked to skull size, was an identifiable racial characteristic.[7] Another science, philology, sought to discover the origins of language, and—thanks to the work of men such as William Jones, Jacob Grimm, and Franz Bopp—believed it had found that origin in the Indo-Europeans,[8] an Aryan race of Nordic stock that, according to early philologists like Max Müller, gave rise to all European people. Since the development of the English language could be traced directly from Indo-European, many philologists concluded that English was purer

and therefore superior to non-Germanic languages.[9] These scholars believed that English

blossomed independently of the Romance languages, which for them were distastefully

associated with Roman hegemony and papal authority. Such thinking gave rise to Anglo-

Saxonism, the idea that English institutions based on German precedents were better than

non-Germanic institutions.

Not all scholars subscribed wholeheartedly to the conclusions of the new

sciences. Matthew Arnold (1822-88) for one saw through the racial hatred that obsessed

so many of his countrymen. Arnold had long been a proponent of educational reform in

England and Ireland, and had been a critic of what he felt were the callous government

policies directing the Celtic regions. He proposed a policy of benevolence regarding

England's Celtic neighbors: "There is nothing like love and admiration for bringing

people to a likeness with what they love and admire; but the Englishman seems never to

dream of employing these influences upon a race he wants to fuse with himself" (392).

Arnold believed that for as much as the English wanted a "united kingdom," their

outright jingoism precluded any chance of a successful union.

In a series of lectures entitled "On the Study of Celtic Literature," Arnold reacted

to this outspoken jingoism by proposing that English culture contained various Celtic

elements, a suggestion that would have been deplorable to Anglo-Saxonists. The

lectures, published in 1866, were initially intended to establish a chair of Celtic literature

at Oxford university.[10] When Arnold finished them—a task which took him nearly six

years—he noted that he "had done all, and more than all, [he] hoped to with these

lectures, whether a professorship of Celtic was immediately founded or not" (496). What

Arnold had "hoped to do," it seems, was to override the racial bias inherent in Anglo-

Saxonism by establishing a cultural connection between the English and their Celtic

neighbors and demonstrating "the marks of a Celtic leaven subsisting in the English

spirit" (493). This connection relied on stereotypes that viewed the Celts as more

"spiritual" than the mundane Germanic tribes that displaced them; if the Celts were spiritual, Arnold suggested, they provided Britain its soul, whereas the hardy Angles provided its body.

Arnold believed that the heterogeneous British Isles could be made homogenous, and long-standing conflicts brought to an end, only if the people of these diverse cultures could identify with some common element within themselves. He argued that the true Englishman was a composite of his or her historical forbears, an amalgam of Saxon, Norman, and Celt with each culture contributing characteristics that together defined the Englishman as a whole. He wanted to demonstrate that although Britain contained various cultural elements, it possessed a homogeneous culture constituting a political and economic whole. By proposing a single social identity, Arnold could justify the political unity of England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland under the term 'British' without completely destroying the cultural diversity that constituted the region.

According to Arnold, the English inherited determination of will from the Saxon, administrative talent from the Norman, and love of nature from the Celt.[11] These descriptive classifications were intended to show that only a varied cultural heritage could account for the English "genius" as Arnold described it. The English, because they inherited the characteristics of Norman, Celt, and Saxon, would be superior to any of the three alone. The defects of each culture would be canceled out by the other's corresponding strengths:

> The Germanic genius has steadiness as its main basis, with commonness and humdrum for its defect, fidelity to nature for its excellence. The Celtic genius sentiment as its main basis, with love of beauty, charm, and spirituality for its excellence, ineffectual and self-will for its defect. The Norman genius, talent for affairs as its main basis, with strenuousness and clear rapidity for its excellence, hardness and insolence for its defect. (351)

As an ethnographer, Arnold wanted to accurately classify cultural difference among the people of the British Isles so as to give the English a reason to identify with all those cultures on a spiritual level. English sentimentality and love of nature, once thought to be

contrary to English constitution, could now be embraced as a quality derived from the Celtic Britons who intermingled with invading Angles, Saxons, and eventually Normans. Without doubting that above all they were of sturdy Nordic stock, the English could be as proud of their Celtic and Norman ancestry as they were of their Saxon.

Arnold's ethnography can be faulted because he confuses literary characteristics with racial and cultural ones. Celtic literature had become more accessible by the end of the nineteenth-century thanks to the work of philologists, and Arnold was especially drawn to the work of the French critic Ernest Renan (1823-92). Renan, in his essay "Sur la poésie des races celtique," distinguishes Celtic literature for its lyricism, illogicality, and concern with nature. Relying on overt stereotypes, Renan explains that these characteristics give Celtic literature a feminine quality: "If it be permitted us to assign sex to nature as to individuals, we should have to say without hesitation that the Celtic race, especially with regard to its Cymric or Breton branch,[12] is an essentially feminine race. No human family, I believe, has carried so much mystery into love" (142). Arnold, relying on his own acute literary skills as well as the new sciences of anthropology and ethnology, extended Renan's ideas by projecting onto the Celts the characteristics he derived from reading Celtic literature. But the qualities that Arnold distinguishes as Celtic—charm, beauty, self-will, ineffectuality, spirituality—are not necessarily those of the Celtic people; rather, they are his interpretation of their literature.

Arnold's ethnological classifications seem less stereotypical than Renan's female-Celt comparison. Perhaps the reason is that we find it logical to infer the qualities of people from their cultural products. Arnold purposefully shied away from blatant stereotypical views of the Celts because he wished to avoid the rampant excesses of feeling surrounding the study of Celtic literature in his time. Instead, he seemed to take the high moral ground by censuring both Celt-lovers (those who would praise Celtic literature regardless of its defects) and Celt-haters (those who would disparage Celtic

literature regardless of its merits). He felt that exuberance in either direction could not be sanctioned and that the topic must be approached in a disinterested and scholarly fashion. Only in this way would the study of Celtic language and literature gain acceptance, and only by studying Celtic language and literature would the English come to fully understand their diverse cultural heritage.

Arnold dismissed the excesses of Celt-lovers because he felt that they distorted the role played by the Celts in history. Celt-lovers, blinded by Philoceltism,[13] proposed that Celtic literature was the oldest vernacular literature in Europe dating back to the sixth century, a proposition intended to pre-empt similar claims made by English and German philologists on behalf of Anglo-Saxon literature.[14] But Arnold had no need to convince Celt-lovers that their literature was worthy of study; instead, his most difficult task was overcoming the low regard with which many English scholars held Celtic languages and literature. A contemporary letter to *The Times* typified this low regard:

> The Welsh language is the curse of Wales…not only the energy and power, but the intelligence and music of Europe have come mainly from Teutonic sources, and this glorification of everything Celtic, if it were not pedantry would be sheer ignorance. (Arnold 390).

Having a Chair of Celtic appointed to Oxford was merely the first step in diminishing cultural bias and uniting a culturally fragmented kingdom.

Yet for all his condemnation of Celt-haters, Arnold, too, wished to see the end of the Welsh language as a political and social tool. He wanted it relegated it to the status of a language to be studied, and not a living language. For Arnold, Celtic literatures and languages were only useful for what they could teach the English about their own psyches. As viable languages, they would only succeed in fragmenting the British Isles. Instead, the Celtic languages would be used as food for the soul: "The Celtic languages and literatures no longer have political prominence in the outer world, but they are worthy of study for what they tell us about the inner world…as a spiritual power" (298). We shall see that this attribution of "inner power" to the Celts and their language

becomes a common theme among later critics—J. R. R. Tolkien among them—who sought to convince others of the importance of Celtic languages and literature in Anglo-American studies.

Arnold's assertion that the Celtic genius is both spiritual and magical posits characteristics that were of little practical importance to the English nation with its imperial aspirations. Imperial England needed men of staunch Anglo-Saxon character, not men taken to Celtic flights of fancy. The Celtic character could be palatable as long as it was not seen to interfere with the business of English nationalism. Since the Celtic languages exhibited a "spiritual" power, their influence on English literature and culture would be one not explicitly apparent, but implicitly felt.[15] The Englishman is infused with Celtic qualities, but those qualities are submerged; they were subordinated to the more visible and practical Saxon characteristics. These Celtic qualities were less apparent because they were deeply embedded in the English subconscious.

Arnold gave prominence to the notion that Celt and Saxon were inextricably bound by a common cultural heritage. Drawing on this association, later scholars would assert that social relations between the two cultures were closely tied, even when textual and historical evidence did not concur (nor even exist). More importantly, Arnold's assumptions find their way into contemporary twentieth-century criticism in the idea that the prehistoric beliefs of ancient races could be gleaned from the literature those people left behind. Modern scholars came to rely on this same assumption when they asserted that the essence of an earlier, pagan philosophy could be unearthed from beneath the detritus left by thirteenth and fourteenth century Christian redactors who imposed non-indigenous (i.e. Christian) elements upon the ancient texts or oral traditions they transcribed.[16] This assumption has long fueled the study of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literature which supposes that scholars will someday be able to reveal the quintessence of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon societies.

That the idea of the composite Englishman decreed by Arnold gained currency cannot be contested; it found fertile ground in late Victorian England. With Irish-Anglo relations worsening in the second half of the nineteenth-century, and the political rhetoric becoming more obviously polemical, many were ready for a change in attitude toward the Irish and Welsh inhabitants of Britain. By the time "On Celtic Literature" was published, Arnold noted that many Englishmen no longer saw the Celts as "alien in speech, in religion, in blood" as they once did (qtd. in Arnold 300). Many scholars, at the bequest of T. H. Huxley and others, finally backed away from untenable claims of English racial superiority, and accepted the view that the Celts shared the Anglo-Saxon's Indo-European heritage. Max Müller, the German philologist who had insisted on England's Aryan origins, by 1888 rejected his former views: "To me an ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar...We have made our own terminology for the classification of languages; let ethnologists make their own for the classification of skulls, and hair, and blood" (qtd. in MacDougall 121).

Some belles-lettristic critics, influenced by Arnold's argument, sought to discover those elements in English literature that were so exceptionally Celtic. One such scholar was Magnus MacLean (d. 1937), a literary dilettante and distinguished professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Glasgow. Besides his many engineering treatises, MacLean wrote two books of belles-lettristic criticism, one an attempted history of Celtic literature he called *The Literature of the Celts*. MacLean wanted to demonstrate that English literature relied heavily on content and themes from Celtic literature. His chapter titled, "The Influence of Celtic, on English Literature," becomes a litany of established English writers and subjects, all dependent on the Celts. In addition to those who invoked the Arthurian legends, he attests that the English writers heavily bearing the mark of Celtic influence were Shakespeare, Collins, Gray, Macpherson, Sir Walter

Scott, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Boswell, and Johnson. MacLean all but states that English Romanticism was wholly dependent upon Celtic literature. According to MacLean, this influence became possible when "Old English came into contact with Celtic from the year 449 onwards" (304). MacLean believed that Celtic influence first manifested itself in loan words: "By the end of [449], the [Celts] had the beginnings of a literature, the [Anglo-Saxons] had not....English literature could not, therefore, have been influenced by Celtic for centuries after the first Saxon invasion, as it had not then come into existence. But the English language was so influenced. From the earliest contact it doubtless bore traces of the Celtic in the form of loan words" (304). As English literature developed, MacLean asserts, so did Celtic influence upon it until a great stream of Celtic thought flowed through English literary tradition.

Although MacLean cites Arnold as evidence of the strong influence of the Celtic upon the English mentality, it is evident that MacLean shared something with the too-enthusiastic Celt-lovers that Arnold would have dismissed. MacLean's primary reason for believing that the Celts influenced the Anglo-Saxons was that Celtic literature pre-dated Anglo-Saxon literature. Such a simplistic notion contradicted what even eighteenth-century scholars knew about the complexity of literary and linguistic borrowing. Once he had established the chronological precedence of Celtic literature, it was a simple task for MacLean to enumerate the Celtic characteristics absorbed by the English. Relying on Stopford Brooke (1832-1916)—the noted English divine and literary critic whose *Primer of the English Language* (1876) was much admired by Arnold—MacLean reiterated the characteristics noted by Renan and Arnold: "These are, first, the love of wild nature for its own sake...; second, the love of colour so characteristic of Gaelic and Cymric authorship; and third, the written, more rollicking humour, which contrasts with the Teutonic humour, which has its roots in sadness" (310). Certainly Brooke could have no example of Anglo-Saxon humor prior to Celtic influence, according to MacLean, since

the Celts had influenced the Anglo-Saxons from the moment they stepped foot upon the British shore. Here the assumption is that Anglo-Saxon literature would have been indistinguishable from continental German literature if there had not been the influence of the Celts.

Try as he may to establish the chronological—and therefore, inevitably influential—precedence of Celtic literature over Anglo-Saxon, MacLean fails to offer a compelling argument because he must constantly concede that English literature continues to proliferate while Celtic literary production (that which is written in a Celtic language) flags. The Celtic characteristics he enumerates were obscured because they had come to be seen by interested scholars as English qualities derived from the Celts rather than Celtic qualities imitated by the English. Even MacLean's own conclusion subverts his earlier arguments:

> Through books of history and philology which have been issuing from the press in a steady flow for decades past, the tide of Celtic influence still continues to rise and permeate every department of English literature. So that from that little spring we saw welling up in the fifth century, and which at first yielded but a few words of Celtic import to incipient English, we have been able to trace a continuous stream, gaining in volume and momentum through the centuries, until now it is like a mighty Missouri which mingles its waters with the broader and more potent Mississippi, to be carried to the great ocean of human intercourse, and lose itself in the common good. (324)

Try as he may to assert the superiority of Celtic literature, MacLean fails to construct a Celticentric point of view. He relies too much upon Arnold's notion that Celtic cultures contributed certain elements to British culture, and so the relationship he seeks to divulge has already been determined for him. This determination can be seen in his choice of hyperbolic American imagery (the Missouri and Mississippi rivers); he cannot avoid subordinating Celt to Saxon.

Critics like MacLean would fail to convince others that social and cultural interaction was common between Celts and Anglo-Saxons for the simple reason that their "Philoceltism" was so apparent. An amateur, MacLean, like other belles-lettristic critics,

propagated earlier critics' impressionistic views; they did little to define the historical relationship between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literature. Before scholars could find a "Celtic leaven" infused among the pages of Old English literature, they had to establish a more positivist historical link from which to work. Arnold's image of the modern Englishman as incorporating Celtic inheritance might be able to convince his audience that a chair of Celtic was a necessary institution, but it would never do as a foundation for "scientific" analysis. New methodologies were required that would purge the subjectivity from existing criticism. This purgation, however, was hampered by the growing gap between scholars and critics. The work of scholars was to build the knowledge used by critics to make their interpretations, but when that knowledge was incomplete (as with *Beowulf*), many scholars felt that interpretation was premature. Without the "groundwork of scholarship" critics would be building castles in the air.[17] Yet the nature of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic studies was such that it was doubtful if any of the key questions would ever be answered satisfactorily, leaving critics out in the cold interminably. As a consequence, the work of critics was seen as increasingly arbitrary and belles-lettristic. A proponent for the Celtic connection was needed, one who could bridge the gap between literary interpretation and literary scholarship. Without such a person, all comparison of Celtic and Saxon literature would collapse.

Celtic literature found its bridge in the astute Chair of Anglo-Saxon, J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973). No other critic had done more to popularize Old English and its cornerstone text, *Beowulf*. What better person to cement the link between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon studies?

In 1955, Tolkien inaugurated the O'Donnell series of lectures—meant to further the study of the relationship between the Anglo-Saxons and the Latin-speaking (i.e. Romanized) Celts they supplanted—with his lecture "English and Welsh." Tolkien wanted to dismantle the Celtic and Saxon stereotypes which were given credence by

Arnold. At the same time, he wished to authenticate the connection between Celts and Saxons on linguistic grounds, giving the Celtic connection an objective legitimacy. In doing so, he gave Celtic scholars a stronger case for Celtic influence on Anglo-Saxon literature by presenting a philological link between the two cultures.

Contrary to Arnold, Tolkien contended that any attempt to "racially" distinguish medieval Celts from Anglo-Saxons was futile because Europeans had become so culturally mixed. He argued that connections between the Germanic tribes and the Celtic tribes must be understood in linguistic terms, not in racial ones; the terms *Celtic* and *Anglo-Saxon* should only be used to delineate the disparate languages spoken by those peoples. "Language," he says, "is the prime differentiator of peoples—not of 'races,' whatever that much-misused word may mean in the long-blended history of western Europe" (166). For Tolkien, the nomenclature for the people who inhabit the British Isles is confused and misunderstood. The names we use to describe those people tell us nothing about their origins. It is language that distinguishes one cultural group from another, and the differences of language do not substantiate the descriptive peculiarities we thrust upon one group or another in the name of "race." According to Tolkien, the Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and English are more homogeneous when viewed from a distance than most would care to acknowledge:

> The north-west of Europe, in spite of its underlying differences of linguistic heritage—Goidelic, Brittonic, Gallic; its varieties of Germanic; and the powerful intrusion of spoken Latin—is as it were a single philological province, a region so interconnected in race, culture, history, and linguistic fusions that its departmental philologies cannot flourish in isolation. (188)

Because of his belief in the cultural interconnectiveness of the British Isles, Tolkien keenly questions the long-standing stereotypes which find the Celt "endowed even in the mists of antiquity, as ever since, with the peculiarities of mind and temper which can be still observed in the Irish or the Welsh on the one hand and the English on the other: the wild incalculable poetic Celt, full of vague and misty imaginations, and the Saxon, solid

and practical when not under the influence of beer. Unlike most myths this myth seems to have no value at all" (172). Tolkien considered these stereotypes useless for discerning the influence of Celtic culture on Anglo-Saxon.

Instead, Tolkien asserts that the influence of the Celtic languages on Anglo-Saxon, if existent, would be most apparent in spoken language because spoken languages are more likely to borrow words than cultivated or written languages. He finds in the linguistic roots of English several associations with Welsh: in the tendency for i-mutation (or i-affectation), in the two forms of the verb 'to be,' in loan-words, and in British place-names. It is language that will reveal the relationship between the cultures, Tolkien insists, implying that previous criticism had engaged in flights of fancy: "Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason" (186).

Like Arnold, Tolkien simultaneously condemns and prolongs Celtic stereotypes. On the one hand, he attempts to shift those stereotypes from a use that is rife with contempt and disdain to one that is positive and intriguing. But at the same time, he rehearses all the previously established Celtic stereotypes by testifying once again to the magical and aesthetic quality of the Celtic languages. Attempting to give some explanation of their attraction to him, he reports that a former teacher's maxim that "a little Welsh is a dangerous thing" enticed him into learning it. He furthermore expresses his belief that Welsh should be studied because of its beauty, relying on some undefined aesthetic criteria as proof. Tolkien admits that there is no reason supporting his notion that Welsh is more aesthetically pleasing to him than English. As evidence, he asserts: "*Nef* may be no better than *heaven*, but *wybren* is more pleasing than *sky*" (39). He accounts for this heightened beauty in the Welsh language by claiming that Welsh learned words are more characteristically Welsh than English learned words are English (40).[18] By this claim, Tolkien seems to mean that there is a closer association between sound

and sense in Welsh than there is in English.

Most importantly for my study, Tolkien inadvertently establishes the link between *Beowulf* and Celtic literature, though he does so unintentionally, while arguing against the identification of Celtic elements in Anglo-Saxon literature. "*Beowulf*," he writes, "though in English, must I should say, be far more Celtic—being full of dark and twilight, and laden with sorrow and regret—than most things I have met written in a Celtic language" (172). His point is that *Beowulf* is not Celtic, that the characteristics which have long been deemed Celtic and Saxon are not borne out in the literatures, nor would they be borne out by the people, language, culture, society, political structure, or other elements. Nevertheless, this ironizing comment gave Celtic scholars the justification they needed to appropriate *Beowulf* for Celtic studies. Seizing on the fact that *Beowulf* is anomalous in Anglo-Saxon literature, many scholars—using Tolkien's points against him—theorized that *Beowulf* must have its origins in something other than Teutonic tradition. Thus, the Celtic analogue.

Celtic scholars—such as James Carney, Martin Puhvel, and Joseph Nagy—who suggest the existence of Celtic elements in *Beowulf* can be seen as both a reaction to and continuation of the type of belles-lettristic criticism created by Arnold, MacLean, and Tolkien. Scholars responded to the lack of objective evidence for a Celtic influence on *Beowulf*—a lack that was manifest in previous interpretations—by seeking to provide that evidence themselves, implicitly appropriating Celtic stereotypes of the wild, incalculable Celt created by belles-lettristic criticism. For them, a Celtic perspective seemed to be a viable alternative to the Scandinavian or Germanic ways of looking at *Beowulf* because it seemed to explain many of the text's illogical and inconsistent events. Beowulf's refusal to use a sword in his standoff with Grendel, Beowulf's ambiguous religious views, the fantastic elements in the main narrative, the poem's anomalous character among Anglo-Saxon texts: all these difficulties could be explained—according

to Celtic scholars—if the poem was viewed in a Celtic context.

Relying on archeological, philological, textual, and literary evidence, Celtic scholars felt justified in drawing upon Celtic analogues for several reasons. First, they argued, the geographical proximity of the two cultures seemed to support a strong likelihood of contact in which a certain amount of cultural sharing and familiarity would naturally occur. Second, both cultures seem to have shared a similar social structure, based on the loyalty of retainers to kings, which some scholars believed was the result of a shared Indo-European heritage. Others believed that literary parallels were the result of monastic sharing.

According to many Celtic scholars, the geographical proximity of the two cultures must have resulted in a great deal of sharing, even when we account for primitive technology. This assumption becomes especially compelling when one considers that the Romanized Britons—Celts who bore heavily the marks of the Roman conquest, assuming Latin customs, names, and language—could not have just disappeared off the face of the earth. Not all could have migrated westward. Some scholars contended that many must have remained behind and been *absorbed* into Anglo-Saxon culture.[19] The idea of absorption became common since no other theory could adequately explain what happened to Celts in those areas conquered by the Anglo-Saxons.

The absorption theory was an appealing notion to scholars because it could account for Celtic influence on Anglo-Saxon culture, even when no hard evidence of a relationship existed. The eminent Nora Chadwick, lecturer in early British culture and history, pointed out how difficult it was to ascertain Celtic–Saxon relations "due to the relative scarcity of early written records among the Celtic Peoples of Britain" (*Celt and Saxon* 2). She noted that although "the period is rich in Latin and Anglo-Saxon sources for Anglo-Saxon political and ecclesiastical history," there is scant evidence "for the

relationship of the Anglo-Saxon ruling classes with the Britons whom they conquered and absorbed."(2). Yet she later stated that "the predominant element in the population of England is Celtic" (qtd. in MacDougall 128). Scholars asserted with certainty that Celtic attributes were evident in English culture even though just how that happened could not be ascertained. And it was this proposed Celtic character of English culture that justified stripping Beowulf of his Teutonic heritage and arraying him in Celtic tradition.

Aside from the notion of absorption, scholars such as Joseph Nagy theorized that the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons shared cultural practices and a similar social structure because they both evolved from a common Indo-European culture. This theory became plausible once philologists determined that the Celtic languages could be classified as Indo-European. It is assumed that if European language evolved from the Indo-Europeans, then cultural practices would have as well. This shared heritage would account for the many similarities between the mythologies of even such geographically distant places as Ireland and India. If this is in fact the case, then Anglo-Saxon and Celtic culture would have also shared many important elements. Some scholars believed that this shared tradition would be evident in the heroic verse passed down over the centuries and eventually written down by Christian redactors who obscured the original meaning of the verse with their Christian interpolations. Any events related in *Beowulf* and paralleled in Celtic literature could be indicative of this earlier shared tradition.

Others, such as James Carney and Charles Donahue, argue that parallels between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literature resulted from the close relationship between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic monks. Scholars have known for a long time that Irish monks established many Anglo-Saxon monasteries, and that many Anglo-Saxon monks lived in Ireland.[20] These scholars argue that it is logical to believe that some monks must have been fluent in both languages,[21] and that a certain amount of cultural sharing took place in this manner.

So it was that scholars who posited Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* depended upon the groundwork of criticism to support their theories (an inversion of the usual scholarly process). These scholars wanted to demonstrate that the existence of Celtic parallels in Anglo-Saxon literature indicated a widespread Celtic influence in Anglo-Saxon culture, Yet because these scholars relied on literary interpretations for evidence of a cultural relationship, their analogues would quickly dissipate in the Celtic twilight.

The first major study that used Celtic analogues as evidence of a Celtic influence in *Beowulf* was James Carney's chapter, "The Irish Elements in *Beowulf*" found in his *Studies in Irish History and Literature* (pub. 1955). Carney believed that early Irish written tales were not the result of oral transmission through the centuries, but were the work of Irish monks who borrowed from saint's lives and oral folktales to create their own stories. In this way he assumes that the apparent parallels between *Beowulf* and Irish literature were not the remains of an earlier Indo-European tradition, but the result of a shared monastic culture. Carney's objective is to wrest the poem from the Germanic context with which it has been so long associated by demonstrating its dependence on Irish literary tradition: "In light of the Gaelic evidence much of the scholarly work done to date on *Beowulf* will need revision" (101)—a rather extreme prescription given the nature of the analogues that he discusses.

Carney suggests that *Beowulf* contains "three different types of Irish material (1) a folk-tale [element derived from "The Hand and the Child," a story which is] ultimately of Eastern origin but which had assimilated an Irish background and character before influencing *Beowulf*; (2) Irish ecclesiastical material listing the progeny of Cain; and (3) the Irish tale *Táin Bó Fraích*" (Carney 85).

Carney explains that Anglo-Saxon scholars have for too long denied ties between *Beowulf* and the Celtic folktale known as "The Hand and the Child" in which a giant hand is chopped off by the hero of the story after it reaches through a window to steal a

child. The history of this Celtic parallel is provided by R. W. Chambers in his 1932

book, *Beowulf: An Introduction*. Chambers offers a reasonable point of view concerning

the parallel. He presumes that the connection with "The Hand and the Child" was

probably made by some scholars in an attempt to make sense of Beowulf's refusal to use

a sword in his fight with Grendel, and of the ensuing struggle that results in Grendel's

arm being torn from his body as he attempts to escape the mighty grip of Beowulf.

Chambers comments that the first scholars to notice the parallel were L. Laistner in 1889,

Stopford Brooke in 1892 (who, it might be recalled, had also been a helpful source for

Magnus MacLean), and A. S. Cook in 1899. But it was not until 1903 that G. L.

Kittredge "made an elaborate study of this type of story, noting the likeness to Beowulf,

but not theorizing further" (479).

Carney complains that these scholars attribute similarities between *Beowulf* and

"The Hand and the Child" to mere coincidence, a conclusion which denies the possibility

of Celtic influence; yet that these same scholars believe *Beowulf* does have ties with the

fourteenth-century Icelandic tale *Grettissaga*, a belief which exposes their German

chauvinism. Carney notes: "Anglo-Saxon scholars on the whole tend to regard both

Beowulf and the *Grettissaga* as deriving independently from an early Germanic original"

(91), an original that has been only theoretically posited. Against this view Carney

contends that in order to take all relevant evidence concerning *Beowulf*'s composition

into account we must see the poem as a mixture of Irish story-patterns[22] *and* "Anglo-

Saxon oral tradition" (99). He believes that after this mixing took place *Beowulf* was

borrowed by an Icelandic writer who gave the story a new historical context in the form

of the *Grettissaga* (99). This historical process would explain the similarities between

Beowulf and the *Grettissaga* without denying that Irish material played a role.

Once Carney has established that *Beowulf* depends on Irish story-patterns, he is

ready to explain how the influences of Irish ecclesiastical material and *Táin Bó Fraích* are

evident in the poem. Like others who attempt to find Celtic parallels in *Beowulf*, Carney

spends a great deal of time explaining parallels of seemingly small significance. He

creates a distorted perspective on the narratives in order to heighten similarities and

subdue differences. His argument for an Irish ecclesiastical source is found in lines 111-

114 of *Beowulf*: "Þanon untydras ealle onwocon, / eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas, / swylce

gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon / lange þrage" (Klaeber 5) [From him (Cain) all the evil

progeny awoke: giants and elves and monsters, giants likewise, who fought against God

for a long time]. He states that this list of creatures could only have come from an Irish

language version of the eleventh-century text, *Sex Aetates Mundi*, which lists a

corresponding set of creatures (in Irish) in reference to the progeny of Cain: *torothair,*

fomoraig, luchorpáin, and *goborchind* [monsters, giants, elves, and horseheads].

Carney believes that the common elements in *goborchind* and *orcneas* (-orchin- and

-orcn-) suggest a meaning for the disputed Anglo-Saxon term *orcneas*, and indicate that

the *Beowulf* author used a version of *Sex Aetates Mundi* in Irish, not Latin, for his list of

progeny. Although he states that one of the many sources for *Sex Aetates Mundi* is

Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, Carney contends that the *Beowulf* poet could not have

used the *Etymologiae*, but must have derived his information only from a Latin version

of *Sex Aetates Mundi* "with some explanatory material in Irish" (105) because both the

Sex Aetates Mundi and *Beowulf* contain the same mistake, a confusion of Cain with

Ham, the son of Noah.[23] Carney fails to adequately explain why an Anglo-Saxon could

not also have had access to the *Etymologiae*, even though it is apparent that Bede,

Boniface, and others made use of it, and not necessarily from an Irish manuscript

(Ogilvy 167).

In a similar fashion as he had with *Sex Aetates Mundi*, Carney heightens the

parallels between *Beowulf* and *Táin Bó Fraích* by reducing both texts to a narratological

study of motifs which downplays any dissimilarities between the two. Carney finds

sixteen points of correspondence between the two stories. These points of correspondence are comparable, Carney notes, except where they needed to be altered to account for the different themes. Carney explains that *Táin Bó Fraích* contains a "love element" between the hero Froech and the king's daughter, an element that is missing in *Beowulf*: "Where TBF emphasises love and physical beauty *Beowulf* emphasises heroism and strength" (119). Carney believes that the difference in theme accounts for parallel events that would otherwise be comparable, as when both Beowulf and Froech battle a monster in an underwater chamber: Beowulf finds a sword by chance whereas Froech is given one by the heroine (127).

The sixteen points of correspondence may indeed be interesting, but they lead Carney to some unwarranted speculation. Assuming implicitly that *Beowulf* was produced by a person who possessed an intimate knowledge of both *Beowulf* and *Táin Bó Fraích*, Carney suggests an early eighth-century date for the composition of *Beowulf* to coincide with the composition of *Táin Bó Fraích*. He believes that the author of *Beowulf* must have been working under similar conditions as the author of the Irish tale. His assumptions even lead him to speculate on a possible author, Aldfrith of Northumbria, because of the date of his death (705 A.D.), a monastic life, and the fact that he would have been familiar with both Gaelic and English.[24]

The *Beowulf* poet, as Carney envisions him, is conveniently obtuse or brilliant as his Celticizing argument requires. When the text redundantly reads both *eotenas* and *gigantas* in consecutive lines, Carney believes that the author misreads the Irish text by failing to recognize that "the Irish term *fomoraig*" refers to giants (105-6), a failure that seems unlikely given the amount of Gaelic knowledge with which Carney imbues his postulated author. Yet when Carney's theory requires that the author reshape the *Táin Bó Fraích* from a love tale to a heroic tale, a task which would require immense skill, the author is imbued with the genius—and command of the Irish language—to make

changes as he or she saw fit. Carney states that "when the purpose of the tale is different

to that of his model one can readily conceive that [the poet] must often reject what is

essential or fundamental to the earlier tale" (100). Would not an artist as adept as Carney

portrays him also avoid the tautology in lines 112 and 113? Carney apparently does not

think so, but the varying nature of his author's skill sheds doubt upon Carney's

argument.

Carney rightly identifies the ideological ends that have shaped Anglo-Saxon

scholarship from the beginning, but he fails to realize that his own scholarship might be

similarly interested. He believes that "[t]he study of vernacular literatures of Western

Europe has been impeded by a narrow nationalistic approach" (84). Carney attacks what

he calls "nativistic views" concerning composition, views which propose that tales such

as *Beowulf* are native to the countries in whose language they appear. Carney contends

that *Beowulf* isn't necessarily a Germanic epic just because it is written in a Germanic

language. He asserts that the physical proximity of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon people, not

linguistic similarity between their languages, would dictate literary influence: "The

relevant factors in the distribution of the theme are geographical proximity and cultural

contacts, not the remote linguistic affinities of any population group concerned" (85).

Just because *Beowulf* and the *Grettissaga* are both written in Germanic languages does

not mean that they are more closely connected than *Beowulf* and non-Germanic texts.

Carney points out that scholars have been mistaken in assuming that literature evolves in

the same way languages do:

> Each linguistic group exaggerates the extent to which its own vernacular literature
> is independent of outside influences and tends to minimise, ignore, or deny, its
> derivative characteristics. Our early literatures are guarded by formidable
> linguistic barriers. Hence the duty of investigating legendary elements, the
> technique of presentation, the whole nature of a literature falls upon the scholar
> whose primary interests are word forms, etymologies, and sentence structure. A
> combination of racialism and linguistics leads to an assumption that languages
> and literatures have developed upon identical principles. (84)

Contrary to Tolkien, Carney believed that Celtic affinities with Anglo-Saxon were

literary, not oral. If *Beowulf* were the result of oral composition, then it would most likely be a Germanic poem, one passed down for generations before the Angles and the Saxons invaded British shores. By giving precedence to the written text, Carney can amplify the value of textual evidence, and demonstrate how such evidence would be indicative of cultural borrowing, thus making more likely his notion that *Beowulf* was the product of cultural contacts between the Celts and Anglo-Saxons long after the Anglo-Saxon migration. As Tolkien insisted that linguistic affinities warranted a new look at Celtic-Saxon ties, Carney insisted that any trace of Irish influence is enough to warrant repositioning the context of *Beowulf*. Both men believed that such traces were an indication of a more pervasive Celtic influence (although Tolkien would have thought Carney's notions regarding *Beowulf* absurd).

Carney re-conjures assumptions of earlier critics by stating "that there is a sub-stratum of Irish thought in Anglo-Saxon literature" (113). He believes that Irish thought, literature, and folk-tales "could form part of the total experience of an Anglo-Saxon poet" (84), but that Anglo-Saxon scholars have overlooked this possibility simply because Anglo-Saxon texts are written in a Germanic language. As proof of an Irish undercurrent he notes miscellaneous examples including "a number of Anglo-Saxon charms" that contain "certain Irish phrases" (112). His various examples do not make a strong case for Irish influence, and, in fact, allude to a reliance on the old Celtic stereotypes. Celtic literature is described as magical, farcical, and as emphasizing "love and physical beauty" as opposed to Anglo-Saxon "heroism and strength" (119). When the content of the poem becomes romantic and fantastical, Carney assumes that such content cannot be Germanic in origin and so must be Celtic. The issue here is not that Anglo-Saxon texts do not contain Irish elements, but what scholars make of those elements: their insistence that those elements reveal a Celtic literary heritage, not a Germanic one.

Carney's conclusions were not well received, but the questions he raised

concerning the chauvinism apparent in *Beowulf* studies piqued the interest of other scholars. Like Carney, Martin Puhvel wanted to de-emphasize the Germanic elements in *Beowulf*, elements that he felt concealed the more important Celtic aspects inherent in the text. In many ways, his argument is a reaction to turn-of-the-century *Beowulf* criticism which claimed that the true epic material of the poem was to be found in the many episodic digressions, and that the main narrative was worthy of little study. He believed that the reluctance of scholars to pursue Celtic analogues initially derived from the presumption that the main narrative, the most promising locale for finding such analogies, was both silly and ill-suited to the lofty style afforded it. Still, Puhvel contends in his 1979 book, *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition*, that it is the main narrative sequence, so long ignored, that demonstrates a clear connection to Celtic literature: "My argument will…make it amply clear that I think [the *Beowulf* poet] was, at least in the Grendel part of the poem, deeply and widely indebted to material such as folktales, and a body of more or less popular tradition, folkloric, historical, and other" (viii).

Puhvel begins his study by reviewing past scholarship on the subject, complaining that early scholars were reluctant to find direct parallels between Celtic folklore and *Beowulf*. These early scholars noted only that similarities were visible: "When scholars previously pointed out some parallel in Celtic literature or tradition to matter in the Anglo-Saxon epic, they tended to avoid firm conclusions as to any definite connection" (1). He cites scholars such as W. P. Ker and Sophus Bugge,[25] who both note similarities in *Beowulf* to Celtic tradition but fail to make a direct connection. He explains that once it became accepted that the main narrative was the true concern of the poem, and the so-called digressions (those passages not concerned with the main story-line) served simply as contrast material for the main narrative, the Celtic parallels became worthy of investigation.

Even the more recent criticism, in Puhvel's opinion, failed to make explicit the

parallels that existed. Of Carney, he contends that although some of the "parallels" are

visible, most "are scattered and by no means close or numerous" (10). Yet Puhvel

suggests that "It is hardly beyond the realm of possibility that the initial part of the

Anglo-Saxon epic...may indeed owe a direct debt to the [Hand and the Child], even if

Carney's theory fails to carry conviction" (10). Puhvel concludes that "[w]hile scholars

such as Dehmer, Murphy,[26] and Carney have in dealing with this issue advanced

significant theories and striking arguments, a good deal of further comparative study is

undoubtedly in order for establishing the nature of the parallelism and analogy" (13).

Puhvel has no problem finding a definite connection to *Beowulf* in the often cited

Celtic folktale "The Hand and the Child." As noted earlier, the history of this Celtic

parallel had been discussed by R. W. Chambers. Yet Chambers reserves judgment on

the significance of the parallel after noting that though the "The Hand and the Child" is

"thought to be of Celtic origin" (480), the tale is also found in Icelandic, Russian, Italian,

and American Indian folklore. The common element in all these stories—ignoring all

differences—is the tearing off of a monster's arm by the hero:

> Naturally a motive so widespread and so obvious is brought into connection with
> innumerable stories; and of course it would be possible to take a number of Celtic
> stories in which a monstrous arm is hewn or torn off, and, by selecting one detail
> here and another there, to form a Celtic composite which would show a likeness
> to the *Beowulf* story. But what would that prove? (482)

Chamber's rhetorical question is unequivocal: He believes that comparisons such as

these are fruitless. That, however, doesn't deter Puhvel.

After stating that his only concern is Beowulf's conflict with Grendel and

Grendel's mother, Puhvel finds eight incidents that point decisively to a Celtic source for

the Grendel portion of the *Beowulf* poem: the strength of Grendel's mother, the *rodores*

candel of line 1572, the melting of the giant's sword, the rage of Beowulf in battle,

Beowulf's swimming feats, his fights with water monsters, his "underwater adventure,"

and his slaying of Dæghrefn. In all of these elements, Puhvel attempts to demonstrate

that the primary source is of Celtic origin. For instance, he maintains that the "yrre" that

Beowulf shows when in battle is derivative of the Irish hero, Cúchulainn's battle-fury.[27]

Puhvel also sees parallels in the Scandinavian *berserkr* rage, but he neatly discards this

parallel by noting that *Beowulf* antedates the Viking raids on England (a "fact"

questioned by Kevin Kiernan, who finds the composition of *Beowulf* contemporary with

its eleventh-century manuscript).

Puhvel's methodology consists of finding parallels to the Grendel conflict in

Celtic folktales, and then using those folktales to explain puzzling events in the poem,

namely "Beowulf's strange mode of combat, the monster's helplessness in the face of it,

and the resulting loss of arm" (93). His argument begins to take on a circular quality

when he insists that Beowulf refuses to follow Grendel after the monster's arm is torn

off because that is what happens in the source:

> Why does he not, for example, quickly move to seize the other arm—if arm
> gripping is his favourite combat technique—or otherwise clutch him as he tries to
> escape, and keep on mangling him? His failure to follow up his advantage is, on
> the other hand, more understandable if viewed in the light of the situation in
> ["The Hand and the Child"], where the hero could hardly be thought able
> immediately to catch up with his adversary since the latter is outside the building
> and thus, if intent on flight, able to get a headstart and vanish into darkness. (92)

Puhvel, like Carney, conceives a *Beowulf* poet who is at once obtuse and brilliant. He

denies his poet the ability to fully escape the influence of his sources, but later insists that

the poet is in complete control of his material. When defending himself against

Chambers's claim that "there is surely a fundamental difference between the story of a

monster who, like Grendel, destroys those who remain overnight in the haunted

dwelling, and the story of the furtive arm which steals away one child after another, till

the hero comes and restores all the children to their parents" (478-9), Puhvel counters

that "[t]his type of reasoning is...hardly convincing as an objection" because "it

represents a rigid, theoretical approach that fails to do justice to the possible flexibility of

approach to the subject of the poet or storyteller...who may be fully capable of moulding

or modifying plot element to suit the purpose at hand" (102). Puhvel argues that any

dissimilarity between the tales must be the result of the author's freedom to shape the

events to his or her purpose, a contradiction of his earlier statement.

As with Carney, when viewed through the clarity of Chamber's lens, Puhvel's

argument is seen for what it is: a myopic interpretation of *Beowulf*. The analogies he

draws are always reductive: Beowulf swims and so do certain Irish heroes; Beowulf gets

angry before he fights and so do Irish heroes; Beowulf fights a hag and so do Irish

heroes. When a similar parallel exists in a non-Celtic folktale, Puhvel describes the

greater context of the tale so that the parallels fall apart or are minimized. Yet, by

ignoring a similar bulk of detail in the Irish stories, a vivid and convincing parallel can be

drawn between the poem and its purported sources. Though Chambers may have his

own reasons for discarding the analogues, we may accept his conclusions: "To this tale

both the "Bear's Son" story and the "Hand and the Child" story show certain

resemblances. I do not see that we can say more than that, in the present state of our

knowledge" (484). Puhvel's short-sighted interpretation leads us to look for reasons,

other than logic, that explain his tenacious argument.

As noted earlier, Puhvel clearly wishes to appropriate *Beowulf* for Celtic studies.

He contends that

> much of the resistance to the acceptance of the "Celtic case" for the Anglo-Saxon
> epic has hinged on a reluctance to place credit in theories purporting to
> demonstrate non-Germanic influence in a poem written in a Germanic country,
> set in Germanic lands, permeated with elements of Germanic (more or less
> legendary) history, and finding affinities in saga elements in Iceland, a
> predominantly Germanic country..." (86).

Beowulf, he insists, is "not a case of a national epic with a patriotic theme; it is a

question of a poem with a plot of folktale origin loosely placed in a historical setting"

(125). Yet Puhvel fails to confront the fact that the poem does contain Germanic

historical elements. He believes that "it would make little difference if Hroðgar and

Beowulf were not, respectively, a Dane and a Geat" (125). Using a structuralist approach

and avoiding any historical explanation of the parallels he finds, Puhvel seemingly

dodges any claims of ideology that could be leveled against him. He shows no concern

for *how* Celtic folklore became a source for *Beowulf*, believing that the analogues are

decisive in making the case for Celtic influence for him. Further, he is not interested in

explaining the meaning of these events; he only wants to prove that the source of the

events is to be found in Celtic literary tradition believing that by breaching the "credibility

barrier [of scholars who insist *Beowulf* is a Germanic poem]...the merits of the case can

be weighed in a more objective fashion" (86).

Yet even Puhvel's approach to Celtic analogues cannot escape questions of

historical significance: if his argument is to be convincing, he must deal with the

Germanic elements in the poem. By not doing so, he becomes guilty of the same

chauvinism—in reverse—for which he accuses Anglo-Saxon scholars. This chauvinism

discloses that Puhvel has fallen prey to the pervasive stereotypes that enshroud both Celt

and Anglo-Saxon. In trying to draw attention away from the "historical" elements of

Beowulf, Puhvel reveals his assumption that the "nature" of the Celt resides in the

fantastic. It is only in the story of monsters and dragons that the Celtic analogues can be

noted, and there also, one finds the true epic quality of the poem. Puhvel implies that

whereas the Saxon is rooted in objective history, the Celt effloresces in imaginative

fantasy. Implied in Puhvel's argument are the same stereotypes ridiculed by Tolkien: "the

wild, incalculable poetic Celt, full of vague and misty imaginations, and the Saxon, solid

and practical when not under the influence of beer" ("English and Welsh" 172). It would

take a much stealthier Celt than Puhvel to convince scholars that *Beowulf* afforded a

steadier glimpse into the Celtic cultural past than into that of the Anglo-Saxons.

It is curious to note that Puhvel chose to reassert many of Carney's arguments

even though Carney's conclusions had been quickly dismissed by most scholars at that

time, among them the highly-respected C. L. Wrenn (1895-1969). Wrenn questioned

Carney's argument, yet was intrigued by his theory that Anglo-Saxon literature contained Celtic undercurrents. Wrenn voiced his opinion that Carney's book was "often highly speculative or eccentric" (16) because, he stated, it "fails to convince, seeming to force the value of apparent parallels in plot while minimizing differences" (26). Yet he calls it an "important book" (16), one that "does a valuable service in pointing to the need to explore with fuller knowledge the whole problem of Irish-Anglo-Saxon literary relations" (26), a comment which may have encouraged scholars like Puhvel to further their inquiries into those relations. Wrenn, like Carney, points out that Celtic characteristics are evident in the magico-religious, the Christian, and the literary elements of Anglo-Saxon culture; however, Wrenn insists that Celtic elements are most apparent in the philological elements of British place-names. One component of his thesis, though not a new one,[28] defended Carney's claim of a Celtic substratum in Old English literary culture on the grounds that many place-names in south-west Britain were Celtic in origin. Wrenn suggests that this use of onomastics indicates widespread Celtic influence.[29] Like Carney, Wrenn concludes with an entreaty for more research in this area, one that will reveal the "hidden" quality of Celtic influence. He suggests that "a more solid and promising matter for study in Anglo-Saxon Irish literary relations is the question of matter and style" (31), leaving further investigation to others.

Once again, the lack of substantive historical data forced scholars to construct a theoretical Celtic substratum within Anglo-Saxon literature, a substratum that relied upon the ever-present myth of Celtic identity; and as philological and linguistic analyses failed to produce the desired conclusions, Celtic scholars took Wrenn's advice and began seeking a Celtic connection in the less explicit elements of *Beowulf*. Instead of looking for evidence of Celtic influence among the narrative threads of *Beowulf*, some believed that stylistic or thematic analysis would yield more productive results. Rather than seeking, in *Beowulf*, material that would point to a particular Celtic source, these

scholars maintained that the Celtic analogues in the poem were visible in ideas and elements of style that were characteristically Celtic, not Anglo-Saxon. Because Anglo-Saxon writers were not limited to literary influence from texts that were only Celtic in transcription, the difficulty of this approach would lie in ascertaining that these ideas and styles were strictly Celtic in nature.

As a result of this difficulty, these analyses would rely even more on stereotypical views of Celt and Saxon. Once again, scholars would find in *Beowulf* attitudes that they proclaim to be Celtic, but in actuality reflect those attitudes that they believe should be Celtic—thus shaping their definition of Celt to fit the particular characteristics of *Beowulf*. Some scholars followed Arnold's lead, seeking out attitudes towards nature that ostensibly revealed Celtic sentimentality; others took Renan's lead, seeking an attitude that disclosed the purported matriarchal quality of Celtic culture.[30] But perhaps a more successful examination was undertaken by scholars who discovered in *Beowulf* a Celtic Christian attitude toward pagan ancestors, an attitude which did not condemn them, but included them in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The noteworthy proponent of this latter type of Celtic influence in *Beowulf* is Charles Donahue. Donahue believed that the Celtic elements in the poem were evident in the way the poet handled theological doctrine. What Donahue wished to do was propose a Celtic "background" to the poem. By demonstrating how *Beowulf* exhibited an undercurrent of Celtic thought, he could displace the poem from the Anglo-Saxonism that circumscribed it without having to discredit the explicit Germanic context of the poem.

Donahue wished to support Tolkien's reading of *Beowulf* that "the Christian poet is constructing a vision of his people's non-Christian past" (*Reconsideration* 56). He claims that although Tolkien saw the characters in *Beowulf* as "heathen, noble, and hopeless," ("The Monsters and the Critics" 26) he was right to interpret the poet as

concerned with the past and wishing to construct a favorable view of his or her

ancestors. Donahue argued that *Beowulf* depicts the heroic acts of a pagan Anglo-Saxon

who demonstrates the "Natural Good"—virtuous action consistent with Christian

doctrine—yet who is ignorant of God's existence. This *naturale bonum*, as Donahue

terms it, constitutes a Christian ideal of pre-Christian goodness ("Ireland" 273). Though

Beowulf himself would be ignorant that a single God had created and oversees the

world, he would have an implicit knowledge of right and wrong, and so would be

assured of a place in paradise on Judgment Day so long as he chose to act in a way

consistent with the good Christian life (though he knew nothing of Christ). Donahue

uses parallels in Irish ecclesiastical law and Irish heroic verse to bolster his claims that

this is a predominantly Celtic way of seeing: "At the time the Beowulf poet lived, many

Irish poets were convinced that the Gaelic past had been populated by kings and sages

who had knowledge of the true God and of the fundamental principles of equity,

although they were unacquainted with Judaism or Christianity" (Function 389).

     In contrast to the Augustinian view that damns all those who were not baptized,

Donahue asserts, insular monastics believed that their ancestors would not be

condemned, but would be equally capable of salvation so long as they acted in a way that

could be construed as consistent with Christianity.[31] He noted that Irish tradition creates

a "third city" for those who have exhibited a virtuous life, but to whom God has not

revealed Himself. Such a view corresponds with those of patristic writers who sought to

reconcile the Old with the New Testament: "The Irish jurists liked to think of their

ancestors not as pagans but rather as patriarchal or even prophetic figures" ("Ireland"

269).[32] These forebears are suspended "between heathen darkness and the light of

revelation" (274). And "Like the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, these

ancestors lived according to a just law."

     Donahue wrote several articles on this subject, each stating his case more

emphatically. In one of his earlier articles, "*Beowulf*, Ireland, and the Natural Good" (1949-51), he shied away from expressing an explicit Celtic-Saxon link, concluding instead that "In the present state of our knowledge, it is perhaps safer to regard the Irish material only as an illuminating analogy to the thought of the *Beowulf*-poet and to leave the question of influence open until further studies of the course of religious thought in early medieval Ireland—and perhaps too in early medieval England—provide the background for conclusions more probable than any can be reached at present" (276). Like Puhvel, who stated that he had no "theory to articulate," Donahue is content only to point out that an analogy exists between Irish theological doctrine and *Beowulf*.

Donahue's next and most widely-known article, "*Beowulf* and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance" (1965), leaves behind all uncertainty and assumes Irish influence, interpreting *Beowulf* as an allegory of the "pre-Christian theist." Donahue states that "[t]he basic idea that his German ancestors were men who lived under the natural law was a belief inherited from the Irish founders of" Anglo-Saxon monasteries (74). Because Irish and Anglo-Saxon monasticism shared a great deal—some scholars would cite the use of insular minuscule script as evidence of this[33]—it would not be incredible to assume that Anglo-Saxon monks would also share certain doctrines. Donahue contends that *Beowulf* and Irish material "bear mutually supporting witness to the existence in Great Britain and Ireland in the late-seventh and eighth-century of a mode of Christianity distinct from that of the Western Iron Age" (63), an age that on the continent exclusively followed Augustine's claim that there could be no salvation for pagans outside the church. For this reason, insular Christianity differed from continental Christianity in "mode" rather than doctrine. Donahue insists that insular Christianity subscribes to

> the typological view of history in Origen's exegesis [which] centers on the concrete and historical person of Christ as the archetype, the supreme paradigm for all human virtues. Christians know him in the Gospel and imitate him consciously, good men who do not know Him nevertheless reflect his virtues in

their own. Coming before Him, as in the Old Testament, they are prophetic of him, not in their words but in their actions; they are his figuræ. (71)

Beowulf, then, is an exemplum of the pre-Christian ideal.

Donahue believes that this sort of exemplum would have a specific social purpose. In a later article, "Social Function and Literary Value in *Beowulf*," he maintains that *Beowulf* 1) "supplied striking images of the value of ancient Germanic society and consequently contributed to keeping those values alive" (389), and 2) "reconcile[d] an admiration for [Anglo-Saxon] ancestors with a Christian faith" (389). In addition, Donahue believes that *Beowulf* "can serve to instruct scholars as to the kind of thinking and feeling that was characteristic of the change from the older beliefs to Christianity in Western Europe in the early Middle Ages" (390). These functions, he maintains, are characteristic of Celtic culture.

Donahue's interpretation differs fundamentally from earlier Celtic scholars in that it is patristic. He assumes that the poem is expressly Christian in composition and import, rather than an example of pre-Christian heroic verse spoiled by Christian redactors. Like Carney, he assumes that the Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* are the result of a shared monastic tradition, but he departs from Carney's assertion that specific narrative and textual elements were derived from Irish sources. Instead, Donahue's interpretation evolves out of a Robertsonian view of the poem which assumes "that all medieval literature whether religious or secular in nature, was an allegory of Christian charity" (Frantzen 79). He believes that *Beowulf* is clearly "an expression of early medieval insular Christianity" (74).

What becomes evident is how completely Donahue depends upon the notion that Celtic ideas lie submerged in Anglo-Saxon texts and so have been long overlooked by Anglo-Saxon scholars. Nowhere in the *Beowulf* text do the Celtic influences make themselves apparent explicitly. Donahue explains that the doctrinal attitudes he describes are not clear but hidden, because Irish Christianity is symbolic, rather than abstract: that

is, it relies on metaphorical rather than abstract theological language. Irish theologians would see Beowulf as a symbol, not of Christ, but of Christian charity. Donahue concludes that the poem's definitive meaning could only be interpreted correctly by an insular audience that had been trained to believe in the *naturale bonum*. He concedes that his interpretation depends strictly upon the audience since nowhere does the poem support his argument, for "on the surface, the poet's view is secular" (Function 389). A continental audience would fail to read the Celtic meaning ingrained in the text because, theologically, they had been trained to believe that all heathens are damned regardless of their actions.[34] Because the meaning of *Beowulf* resides deep below its surface in a theologically symbolic meaning, Donahue must rely on the poet's silence concerning certain matters to make his points. He uses summary to attribute motives and thoughts to Beowulf not explicitly stated (nor logically implied) in the text. On lines 2794-2801, for example, where a mortally-wounded Beowulf thanks the *wuldercyninge* for his life, Donahue concludes with a summary that derives from his own interpretation:

> Beowulf is not thanking God because he has received help for himself but because he has been enabled to lay down his own life to help his friends. Theologians in the audience would certainly note that here was a spiritual state advanced far beyond what was to be expected under the laws of nature (Celtic 107)

Nowhere in *Beowulf* is this reading evident. Yet Donahue contends that it is crucial to the meaning of the poem that even Beowulf does not understand what is happening to him on a religious level, and that only "[t]he better instructed among [the poet's] audience probably realized that they were witnessing the birth of charity where explicit charity had not been known" ("Beowulf and Christian Tradition" 108).

Because the literal content of the poem would lead the unwary reader away from the intended meaning of the text, it is up to Donahue to demonstrate how Irish elements lie embedded in the poem. By keeping his interpretation independent of the text, he is able to assert that the theological doctrines in *Beowulf* are specifically Celtic. But he

could have just as easily identified those doctrines as Germanic or Latin or Scandinavian, if such had been his purpose. So it is with other arguments that describe Celtic analogues in *Beowulf*. If the Grendel sequence is indeed dependent on "The Hand and the Child," then who is to say that *Beowulf* isn't essentially a tale of native American origin created by Scandinavian poets whose ancestors, like Leif Erikson, once skirted a distant and unfamiliar shore, and brought home wild tales of children stolen by giant claws. The scholar who seeks a certain origin is bound to find it, when so many questions remain unanswered in a particular field of study. Donahue is able to shape the "facts" around his interpretation because so many of the facts remain open to speculation. It is precisely this speculative nature of Anglo-British relations in early medieval studies that has made them so vulnerable to chauvinism.

So it is that the scholars of these studies depend upon the stereotypical notion of hidden Celtic elements. Never explicit in the literature, Celtic elements remain obscure, waiting for the right scholar to reveal them. Notably, one might argue that it is ridiculous to question the attempt of scholars to illuminate our understanding of *Beowulf* in this way because that is what scholars do: they bring to our attention those elements in a text that may be hidden or easily overlooked. I agree that this is true; however, implicit in these attempts to find in *Beowulf* a Celtic origin is a chauvinistic drive that relies on unsubstantiated identification of literary elements as Celtic.

Finally, it remains to speculate on the reasons why scholars would want to shift the context of *Beowulf* from a Germanic to a Celtic context. If *Beowulf* could be proven to have a Celtic origin, it would be a boon to Celtic studies. Frantzen has discussed how Anglo-Saxon studies, once the center of English literary studies, has become marginalized, pushed aside by critics' preference for modern literature (5). Likewise, the study of Celtic languages and literature has languished. Although it might be said that Celtic studies had never gained prominence at all, it has seen the same declining interest

as Anglo-Saxon studies so that it has come to be something of an other's Other. One need only note the scarcity of Celtic programs in the United States to conclude that they are an endangered species. This secondary and attenuated status might explain Celtic scholars' desire to attach it to other disciplines, to buoy it up in effect. Likewise has Anglo-Saxon studies turned to new methodologies to revive its diminishing status. But if scholars are to examine the connective tissue that binds their disciplines, then it must be their subject matter that determines the connection, not their desires.

Scholars who find Celtic analogues in *Beowulf* have mistakenly coupled ethnography[35] and literary analysis (in the same way that race has often been coupled with physical or intellectual superiority). Terms like "Anglo-Saxon" and "Celt" are terms of convenience and necessary if literary studies are to have historical relevance, but attaching those terms to theme, style, or narrative structure may be no less fallacious than attaching them to levels of intellectual or physical capability. Because Celtic literature does exhibit certain characteristics, Celtic scholars believed that when those same characteristics were manifest in Anglo-Saxon literature, they were the result of Celtic influence. These scholars refused to accept that the characteristics they labeled "Celtic" could be derived from other sources, or that there might not be anything "Celtic" about them at all. Since both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon scholars believed that the literature they studied mimetically reflected the culture in which it was produced, they needed only to identify certain attributes as belonging to one culture or the other in order to make their respective points.

My study of how Celtic analogues have been used to illuminate *Beowulf* illustrates the difficulty inherent in any attempt to isolate and describe the elements that make up any culture. There is no doubt that Anglo-Saxon culture (if one can so designate it using this term of unity and homogeneity) was influenced in various ways by those contacts it had with people who spoke Celtic languages. The Germanic tribes that

crossed the English channel did, after all, supplant the Roman-influenced Britons who resided there, and people of all insular cultures could be found in the monasteries dotting the landscape in the now British Isles. But to think that one can possibly separate the various strains that compose so fluid a state as culture seems ludicrous. To do so— especially using literary texts, which readily transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries we apply to nations, cultures, and races—requires a great deal of subjective construction. This subjectivism is most notable when the construction takes place over the chasm of fifteen hundred years. I do not mean to imply that it is futile to try to do so; rather, more care must be taken to avoid allowing ideology to assume the guise of interpretation.

Multicultural comparison, a type of which Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literary parallels constitute a part, is currently undergoing an anxious re-evaluation.[36] Charles Bernheimer has suggested that "multicultural comparatism begins at home with a comparison of oneself to oneself" (11). I presume he means that scholars must be aware of their historical limitations and their conscious or unconscious ideological biases. Such an awareness, Bernheimer states, would sensitize the scholar to both the similarities and differences that exist among cultures (11). The connection that exists between Celtic literature and *Beowulf* (if such a connection can be shown to exist) would constitute a "mobile, fluid space of intersecting class and family allegiances, clan and religious traditions, historical and political pressures, inherited traits, unconscious drives, geopolitical locales, and so forth" (12) rather than a reductive intersection of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon culture. Bernheimer's complex approach may prove fruitful; yet the scarcity of scholars studying Celtic literature, and the little we know about the cultural interaction that took place in Britain in the early Middle Ages, makes one skeptical about our ability to reconstruct the personal, cultural, political, and religious circumstances that created *Beowulf*.

In any case, if comparison of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic literature is to be meaningful, scholars must examine not only the thematic and textual similarities of these literatures but also their differences. If we look to the texts themselves for this information, instead of our desires, we might come to understand the creative forces and cultural pressure that produced *Beowulf*. The re-creation of these contexts by definition will be contaminated by our own cultural assumptions and will seem conciliatory at best, yet as C. S. Lewis noted thirty-five years ago, "If I can't get out of the dungeon I shall at least look out through the bars. It is better than sinking back on the straw in the darkest corner" (101-2). Only by receiving Celtic and Anglo-Saxon texts on their own merits and allowing them to determine their own relationship will we be able to do justice to the complexity of *Beowulf*, both as cultural icon and literary creation.

NOTES

[1] The terms *Saxon* and *Celt* are not without difficulty, and much misunderstanding can be traced to their indiscriminate use as appellations for homogeneous groups. They have often been used to denote different races, but the terms are more accurate as linguistic classification. The term *Anglo-Saxon* is problematic because it gives the false impression of cultural unity in the areas of Britain in which Teutonic people settled. But they were far from being a uniform group, at least in the incipient stages of their history. The term *Celtic* is problematic for similar reasons, especially when we realize that it embraces Gauls, Belgae, Galatians, and Britons. Certainly by 449 A. D., those people who spoke the Celtic tongues Irish and Welsh could be seen in some ways as culturally distinct (See Sir Ifor Williams's *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry*, ch. 1). To conflate the two because they both speak a Celtic language, and to speak of a singular Celtic influence upon Old English literature would greatly reduce the true cultural diversity that existed in Britain at that time. The ambiguity of the terms has permitted a great deal of liberality in *Beowulf* scholarship.

[2] See the preface to Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (ix-xiii).

[3] This tendency is not just evident in the search for Anglo-Saxon origins. Hugh MacDougall in his book, *Racial Myth in English History*, has demonstrated how the Arthurian myths of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* were used by early English Kings to justify their political reign. Geoffrey connected the origins of the Celtic Britons with the Trojan Brutus. "By portraying the British as a once great people with extensive dominions he could at once raise their status in the eyes of their new Norman overlords and suggest a precedent to the Norman kings in their imperialistic ambitions"(7).

[4] In *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* Robinson shows how Klaeber capitalizes occurrences of *metod* [lit. measurer]. These are not capitalized in the manuscript and may prejudice the critic's interpretation of the nature of god/God to the Anglo-Saxons.

[5] Hubbub is an appropriate term considering it is one of the few Celtic-derived words in the English language (though it is not of the time period of which we are speaking); appropriate too considering it is not truly Celtic, but a foreign interpretation of a Celtic language, Irish specifically. Ostensibly it is derived from an ancient Irish war cry, *ub! ub! ubub!* which was apparently an expression of contempt. It's first use is noted in 1555 to mean the confused shouting of a savage race. It is no secret that, in general, the Irish were seen by the English as just such a "savage race."

[6] For a very recent view of how Irish writers appropriated English stereotypes of the Irish and used them

for their own purposes see Elizabeth B. Cullingford's "British Romans and Irish Carthaginians: Anticolonial Metaphor in Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness." *PMLA* 111 (1996): 222-39.

[7] "[D]olichocephaly [long-headedness] was postulated as being characteristic of the Germanic people and indicated high intellectual capacity, just as brachycephaly [short- or broad-headedness] was typical of inferior or retarded people" (MacDougall 122) For an example of how commonplace this knowledge had become, witness the physical description of two of the most intelligent literary characters of the century: Sherlock Holmes and his arch-rival Professor Moriarty.

[8] Indo-European refers to the language spoken by a people inhabiting the steppes north of the Black Sea around 5000 BC. The language had to be theoretically reconstructed by scholars because no written record of the language exists. In addition, it was postulated to be the language from which most European languages as well as many Asian ones evolved. The terms Indo-European and Aryan were at one time synonymous, but the association of Aryan with racist overtones of superiority and German nationalism gave the term connotations from which later scholars were more than ready to disassociate themselves.

[9] Holger Pedersen has noted that whereas the Germanic languages were well-established as an Indo-European language by the turn of the nineteenth-century, Celtic languages were not accepted as such until mid-century. Pederson attributes this late acceptance to the lack of native scholars capable of completeing a comparative historical study. See *The Discovery of Language: Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century*, Trans. John W. Spargo, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1962, pp. 30, 53-63.

[10] This event did not occur until the appointment of John Rhys at Jesus College in 1877.

[11] The problem with such an approach is that it could (and did) quickly become reductive as a means of classification, leading some critics (see my section on MacLean, pp. 13-15) to group English writers according to the cultural characteristics they exhibited. In this way, one might claim that Kipling stood a ready Saxon, that the Norman spirit infused Milton, and that none was more Celtic than J. M. Barrie.

[12] What Renan distinguishes as branches of the Celtic race are really linguistic distinctions as Tolkien later points out in his essay "English and Welsh." The Celtic languages are divided into two groups according to historical sound developments. The Q-Celtic group comprises Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx; the P-Celtic group comprises Welsh (or Cymric), Breton, and Cornish. It might be seen as rather unfortunate that the nomenclature of linguistic distinction has been conflated with nationality and race, but such conflation, I am sure, will prove to be an fertile topic of study if it is not so already.

[13] Arnold's term for the excesses of Celtic enthusiasm. Charles Wright's *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* serves as a recent example of the type of disinterested study Arnold tried to

achieve. Wright contends that the Celtic influence can be seen in Anglo-Saxons' use of numeric

lists, which he terms the Irish 'enumerative style,' as well as certain apocalyptic material.

[14] Actually, most Celtic manuscripts belong to the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries; but

Celtic scholars then theorized that these extant manuscripts had been copied from much earlier

manuscripts.

[15] One can almost see Arnold explaining away English Romanticism as the result of the Celtic spirit

inherent in the English. A later critic, Magnus MacLean, does explicitly attribute Romanticism to

the Celts (see below pp. 13-15).

[16] An example of this assumption can be seen in Bertha S. Phillpotts's "Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-

Saxon Thought." Fulk 1-13.

[17] See Gerald Graff's chapter "History vs. Criticism: 1940-1960" in *Professing Literature: An

Institutional History* 183-94.

[18] "In Welsh there is not as a rule the discrepancy that there is so often in English between [long-winded

and bookish words] and the words of full aesthetic life, the flesh and bone of the language" (Tolkien

40).

[19] On this phenomenon Kenneth Jackson retorts: "...don't tell *me* the Angles didn't have a lot of half-

British babies in the North—and a very good thing too, *I* daresay" (*Angles and Britons* 73).

[20] Thomas Cahill has recently exploited this knowledge in his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

He contends that during and after the invasion of the barbarian hordes, Western Civilization was

"saved" by the Irish monks who protected—and later propagated—classical knowledge .

[21] On this possibility Tolkien comments: "Communication certainly went on. But communications

imply persons, on one side or both, who have at least some command of the two languages" (181).

And who says these need have been monks?

[22] Carney contends that these story patters are derived from "The Hand and the Child" and *Táin Bó

Fraích*.

[23] He cites line 107 in *Beowulf* where manuscript has been altered to read *Caines* for *Cames*.

[24] This type of authorial guesswork is pervasive in *Beowulf* criticism. Conjectured authors are chosen

for their ability to "fit" the scholar's interpretation.

[25] Ker in *Epic and Romance* (New York, 1897) and Bugge in "Studien über das Beowulfepos," *Beiträge

zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* XII (1887), 77.

[26] Both Heinz Dehmer ("Die Grendelkämpfe Beowulfs im Lichte moderner Märchenforschung."

Germanisch–Romanische Monatsschrift 16 (1928): 202-18.) and Gerard Murphy (*Duanaire Finn, III:

Irish Texts Society* (Dublin, 1953) XLIII, 184ff.) claimed that *Beowulf* relied on a Celtic folktale

known as "The Hand and the Child."

[27] A point also made by Joseph Nagy, "Beowulf and Fergus: Heroes of Their Tribes?" p. 40. Nagy attempts to show that both *Beowulf* and the story of Fergus mac Léti are dependent upon Indo-European notions of kingship for their material.

[28] In 1938, C. L'Estrange Ewen censured anthropologists for their inability to determine the cultural heritage of Great Britain. His article, "Are the British 'Anglo-Saxons' or Celts: The Onomatologist to the Aid of the Anthropologist" determines through the use of place-names that the British are, without a doubt, Celtic. See also Susan Reynold's "What do we mean by 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Anglo-Saxons'?" and the collection of articles in *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures*.

[29] On this point Kenneth Jackson says: "The evidence of place-names is a positive fact" (73). See 15n.

[30] See, for example, Andrew Welsh's article, "Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale."

[31] In his edition of *St. Erkenwald*, Clifford Peterson reveals that the "story of a righteous heathen whose soul is rescued from limbo by the intercession, through baptism, of a saintly Christian...no doubt derives from a similar story, extant in one form or another since the eighth century, involving Pope Gregory the Great and the Roman Emperor Trajan" (38). If this is so, then depending on when one dates *Beowulf*, it is likely that the idea of the "pre-Christian theist" was not Celtic at all, but Latin.

[32] Relying on Robinson's interpretation, Nicholas Howe stresses the *Beowulf* poet's reliance on the Old Testament *Exodus* to evoke a migration myth that could be used to "apprehend and interpret the historical process by which Anglo-Saxon culture was transformed from its origin in pagan Germania to its converted state in Christian England" (176). This use of the migration myth, first evident in Gildas, could not be characteristically Celtic.

[33] See Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography*, pp. 90-5. Also see David Dumville, "Beowulf Come Lately: Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex," *Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the Early Middle Ages*, (49-63) for an interesting approach to dating *Beowulf* using paleographical evidence.

[34] This is precisely where Fred Robinson would disagree. In *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, Robinson states emphatically: "For all the Beowulf poet says, we are left with heroes who are pathetic in their heathenism while being at the same time, noble in their thoughts and actions; they are exemplary but cannot save themselves" (13). Robinson disagrees vehemently with the idea that Anglo-Saxons would believe that pre-Christians could gain salvation without some sort of knowledge of God. He argues that the Augustinian view would be central to Anglo-Saxon society; therefore, no Anglo-Saxon poem would espouse a belief to the contrary.

[35] Both James Clifford and Clifford Geertz have demonstrated that ethnography in itself belies a marginalization of the cultures it seeks to describe in its use of authoritative voice, in addition to other rhetorical modes. See Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Authority." Munns and Rajan 257-

83. and Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." Munns and Rajan 236-56.

[36] See Bernheimer, Charles, ed. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.

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