Teaching *Beowulf* in Its Manuscript Context

As a young, and therefore itinerant, academic I've now taught *Beowulf* in three institutions, two in the United Kingdom and one in Ireland. I've taught *Beowulf* to first-, second-, and third-year students, as well as on taught master's programs, and though I've yet to teach a course exclusively dedicated to the poem in its manuscript context, the manuscript is a more-or-less constant presence in my mind. As an anthology, the manuscript provides intertexts for *Beowulf* which share with the poem thematic concerns, particularly monstrosity; as a datable witness, it offers an historical context in Æthelræd's England for a poem whose origins are unknown; and as a manuscript text, it confronts students with the significant ways in which medieval textuality differs from modern. What follows draws principally on teaching *Beowulf* in ten, one-hour lectures at University College, Cork, as part of a third-year course entitled "Of Monsters and Men: Humor and Horror in Medieval Literature," but also my other experiences in Cork and elsewhere.

In addition to *Beowulf,* London, British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fols. 94-209 (the Nowell Codex) contains four other texts – the Life of St. Christopher, the *Wonders of the East*, the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *Judith*. For many years, no single-volume edition or translation of these texts was available, so we are now fortunate to have Fulk's edition and translation of the whole Nowell Codex for the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library. Together the texts constitute, to use Fred C. Robinson's phrase, the "most immediate

context" for the poem.[1] These share a number of themes with *Beowulf*, chief among them heroism, monstrosity, kingship and gender. Of these the most obvious is certainly monstrosity. Both the *Wonders of the East* and the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* catalogue the strange and extraordinary; *Beowulf* famously slays three monsters; and St. Christopher is a *cynocephalus* (dog-head). *Judith* lacks an obvious monster (and has sometimes been excluded from such discussions on codicological grounds), but both the "heathen dog" Holofernes (*Judith* 110b) and the man-killer Judith are possible candidates.[2] Challenged to describe the Nowell Codex with no rubrics or other indications to guide him, a medieval librarian might well have identified it as *liber de diversis monstris, anglice* ("a book in English concerning various monsters"); this is certainly how it was read in the fifteenth century.[3]

The centrality of Grendel, his mother and the dragon to *Beowulf* make monstrosity one of the most effective and interesting ways to bring the *Beowulf* manuscript into the classroom. In Cork, I devote the first half of my third-year lecture course to the manuscript, beginning with *Beowulf*, turning to the *The Wonders of the East* and *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, then *St. Christopher* before finishing with *Judith*. Almost catalogue-like in structure, *The Wonders of the East* and *Letter Alexander to Aristotle* provide ample material to discuss the medieval monstrous, a term in its medieval usage (Latin *monstrum*) considerably more complex than its modern tabloid application to those guilty of crimes of moral turpitude.[4] *The Wonders of the East* is also illustrated, and

can therefore enliven an otherwise text-heavy powerpoint presentation. I typically use the images from London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B. v (a more prestigious, bilingual copy of the *Wonders* and partly reproduced in full color on the British Library's online Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts). Those with a stricter commitment to accuracy may prefer to use Malone's facsimile or Kiernan's Electronic *Beowulf*. For secondary reading, I recommend Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies*, Cohen's *Of Giants* and Mittman's *Maps and Monsters*, along with a number of articles focussing on the individual texts.[5]

Having established that the texts share a common interest in the monstrous, the course continues by showing how the *Beowulf* manuscript can provide a socio-historical context for the poem. Debates about the dating of the poem rumble on and on, and it seems unlikely agreement will ever be achieved about whether the poem is as old as the seventh century or as new as the early eleventh century.[6] In light of this uncertainty, it can be liberating to focus not on the poem's composition, but on its transmission, asking what motivated the two scribes to copy the poem and the accompanying texts in the latter half of Æthelræd's reign.[7] Drawing on the notoriously anti-Æthelræd annals in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the *Battle of Maldon*, I paint a picture of Anglo-Saxon England at the end of the first millennium as like Heorot—constantly beset by unwelcome attacks. We also discuss the enigma of why a poem so complimentary to the Danes could have been transcribed in a period when the Vikings were so reviled.[8] My (half-)facetious suggestion that Anglo-Saxons

might have enjoyed hearing the graphic descriptions of Grendel dismembering

Danish thanes in Heorot is usually received with a smile.

Such thematic discussions inevitably open up codicological and textual

considerations. While it is undeniable that the texts in the Nowell Codex are all

more or less concerned with monstrosity, that is not to say it is for this reason

they were compiled. Accordingly, I offer the students several other possible

interpretations of the thematic unity of the Codex, chief among them Gunhild

Zimmerman's suggestion that the compilation served to remind retainers of

their duty to fight for the people, and Kathryn Powell's argument that

Christopher and *Judith* share with *Beowulf* a concern with rulers and rulership.[9]

Students may find these suggestions attractive, but can also be encouraged to

view them sceptically: banally practical reasons like the availability of

exemplars and vellum may ultimately be as good an explanation for the

organisation of the Nowell Codex as the conscious compilation of like texts to

political ends.[10] Perhaps without even realising it, the students are by this stage

of the course discussing the poem as a material text. The *Beowulf* manuscript

can thus function as an engaging introduction to the advanced disciplines of

palaeography and codicology, and thus aid graduate recruitment: rightly a

priority nowadays.

It's typically at this point that I hand the students a photocopy of a leaf

from the *Beowulf* manuscript and we spend an hour discussing the ways in

which it differs from the edition (usually the Norton *Beowulf*) in which they've

hitherto read the poem. I tend to use a different leaf each time, choosing one

which contains a part of the text that has caused a particular stir that term,

photocopying from Zupitza's facsimile for the Early English Text Society or

printing from Kiernan's *Electronic Beowulf*. I begin by getting the students to

play a game of spot the difference, an exercise I've also used with success in

other contexts, even with first-year students. Several features usually attract

instant comment: the text, handwritten not printed; the fire-damaged,

fragmenting condition of the leaves; the lack of titles, running or otherwise; the

apparent presentation of the poem as prose; and the presence of numbered

section divisions. Asked to look more closely and given some prompting, the

neophyte palaeographers begin to observe further disparities: the different letter

forms (some, like **þ** and **ð**, maintained by editors; **ƿ** replaced with **w**); the

erratic word division; the light and unconventional punctuation; and the

presence of scribal corrections. It quickly becomes clear that the original

manuscript and the Norton *Beowulf* vary significantly.

The next lecture is given over to a biography of the *Beowulf* manuscript,

emphasising the human interest aspects of its history. Hand B's sudden takeover

of Hand A's stint in the middle of a verse at fol. 175v/4 (*Beowulf* 1939b) has

prompted a number of biographical speculations, the most extreme of which

conjectures his sudden demise at this exact point of the copying process.[11]

Damp cupboards, exposed window sills and the habitually inclement English

weather have all featured in explanations of the severely damaged condition of fols. 182r and 201v.[12] Discussions of *Judith*'s place in the Nowell Codex have given a starring role to the death watch beetle.[13] Working with manuscripts is often an exercise in the art of detection, and (to give them a sense of the excitement it can bring) I encourage students to read Roberta Frank's delightful 2007 Presidential Address to the Medieval Academy where she modestly casts herself as Watson to two Holmes: R. D. Fulk and Michael Lapidge.[14] I talk also about the lasting controversy over Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* and his self-described attempts to 'fight like a loyal thane to save the poem from fire-damage and other forms of draconic emendation'.[15] We trace how competing accounts of the manuscript's codicology – Sisam's, Kiernan's, Lucas's – might affect our earlier arguments about the thematic coherence of the Codex.[16]

By this stage of the course, two things will have become apparent to the students: that *Beowulf* is, in important ways, unlike a modern poem and that modern editions are remediations of the text which inevitably omit or distort features of the poem's manuscript textuality. While these are sophisticated ideas, which the students are excited to grasp, there's no place to develop them further in the third-year course on humor and horror I've been describing. I have however used similar ideas in a lecture given to first-year students about to embark on reading *Beowulf* in translation for the first time. A lot of immature first-year work is marred by a reliance on rote regurgitation of facts rather than

individual, intellectual engagement with the texts. By using a discussion of the

manuscript to emphasise how little we know about *Beowulf* and how disputed

some basic circumstances of the poem's genesis are, I hope to shake students

from this torpor. I set no assignment associated with this lecture, but I have

found it makes the students all the more alert and receptive to the poem's

peculiarities when we begin reading it the following week.

The first-year lecture begins with the Norton *Beowulf*, the edition in

which the students will read the poem, and takes the students gradually back

through the poem's reception history by repeatedly asking what each text's

antecedents were, so that we move from the Norton edition, to the original

edition of Heaney's translation published by Faber, to Wrenn's edition (in

which Heaney reports he first studied the poem), to the manuscript, discussing

its date and contents. I briefly let the students enjoy feeling they've found solid

ground here, before asking them to consider where the text of *Beowulf* in Cotton

Vitellius A. xv itself came from. Discussion throws up three basic possibilities:

the manuscript is the author's autograph; it's a transcription of an oral

performance (schooled on Irish material at Cork, they are aware of the orality of

some early literatures); or it's copied from an exemplar.

Despite Kiernan's arguments, it is unlikely the manuscript is the author's

autograph.[17] It is undeniable that the manuscript text on occasion dissolves into

nonsense (for example, with Hand B's *mere wio ingasmilts* (*Beowulf* 2921b),

apparently for *Merewionigas*, 'Merovingians'); many editors emend as

frequently as once every ten lines.[18] This suggests the text of *Beowulf* in the

Nowell Codex was copied from an exemplar, and even this exemplar was at

some remove from the poet's archetype, whatever form that archetype took.

Such copying errors also vitiate the suggestion that Cotton Vitellius A. xv

is a transcription of an oral performance, but the suggestion does give a valuable

opportunity to discuss the poem's orality. While most modern readers of

Beowulf read the poem silently to themselves, an Anglo-Saxon reader of

Beowulf would most likely have intoned the poem aloud; as far as we know,

early medieval reading was therefore always performance. *Beowulf*'s prose

lineation, limited word division, inconsistent punctuation and frequent textual

corruption could have been navigated only by a skilled reader, as familiar with

the verse types, formulas and tropes of alliterative poetry as the poet who

composed it. Even though it is a text, the Nowell Codex can therefore be

considered a record of past recitals, and a spur to future oral performances—the

equivalent, perhaps, of the lyric booklet which accompanies a CD, or the script

of a play, texts which likewise presuppose a concomitant orality.

It soon becomes clear to students that MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv is

neither an author's autograph nor a fan's bootleg transcription, but a copy of

another manuscript. I explain that this exemplar is of unknown origin, date and

authority, and is likely itself preceded by an unknown and unknowable number

of manuscripts. A product of Anglo-Saxon scribes, sixteenth-century restorers,

and its modern editors as much as its anonymous and unknown poet, the poem

as we have it today therefore resists any attempt to attribute its literary effects to a single author figure, who exercised exclusive control over the text. Though this may sound like a counsel of despair, the final twist in the lecture is to convince students of the contrary, arguing that *Beowulf*'s complex transmission leaves them free to attend to the poem's reception, seeing the manuscript and its editions as part of a continuum that also includes Heaney's translation and the Zemeckis *Beowulf*. The latter's strangely-sired dragon and Oedipal subplot then become just as much a manifestation of textual *mouvance* as the corrections spontaneously made by the first scribe.

Teaching *Beowulf* in its manuscript context can offer undergraduates both compelling context for an otherwise *sui generis* poem and a potent challenge to their initial confidence that the poem can be approached in the same way that they might read modern verse. It can also provide an early introduction to the disciplines of palaeography, codicology and textual criticism, or lead to discussion of broader issues in medieval studies such as orality, social structure, or identity and alterity. Teaching *Beowulf* in its manuscript context offers a portal to an amorphous group of anonymous scribes, readers and listeners from over a millennium ago.

NOTES

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[1] Fred C. Robinson,. "Old English Literature in its Most Immediate Context," in *Old English Literature in Context: Ten Essays*, ed. John D. Niles (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980), 11-29, 157-61.

[2] All quotations are taken from R.D. Fulk, ed. and trans., *The Beowulf Manuscript*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Fulk takes his text of *Beowulf* from R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds. *Klaeber's Beowulf*. 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

[3] Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953). The fifteenth-century glosses to the *Wonders of the East* on fol. 102v are discussed by Jane Acomb Leake, "Middle English Glosses in the *Beowulf*-Codex." *Modern Language Quarterly* 23 (1962): 229-32.

[4] Fundamental are Augustine, *The City of God* bk. 16, chap. 8 ("Whether certain monstrous races of men were produced as descendants of Adam or of the sons of Noah"), and Isidore, *Etymologies* bk. 11, chap. 3 ("On portents").

[5] Kemp Malone, ed., *The Nowell Codex: British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. xv, second MS*. EEMF 12 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963); Kevin Kiernan, *The Electronic Beowulf*, 3rd edition. (London: British Library, 2011) DVD-ROM; Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Medieval

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Faulkner, 'Teaching *Beowulf* in its MS Context', in Chickering, Frantzen & Yeager, eds.,
Teaching Beowulf in the Twenty-First Century (ACMRS, 2014), 169-75.
Preprint

Cultures 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Asa Simon

Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[6] The major arguments are outlined in Colin Chase, *The Dating of Beowulf*,

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981; repr. 1997), with recent

developments surveyed by Roberta Frank, "Scandal in Toronto: *The Dating of*

'Beowulf' a Quarter Century On," *Speculum* 82 (2007): 843-64.

[7] For the dating, see David N. Dumville,"*Beowulf* Come Lately: Some Notes on

the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex." *Archiv* 225 (1988): 49-63.

[8] See Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 15-23, but also Dorothy

Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 24-26.

[9] Gunhild Zimmerman, *The Four Old English Poetic Manuscripts: Texts,*

Contexts and Historical Background, Anglistische Forschungen 230.

(Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1995), 233-77; Kathryn Powell, "Meditating on Men

and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf*

Manuscript," *Review of English Studies* n. s. 57 (2006): 1-15.

[10] Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 133, for example postulates

that *Beowulf* "has nothing of significance in common with those prose texts that

now precede it."

[11] Leonard Boyle, "The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf*," in Chase, ed.,

Dating of Beowulf, 23-32 (at 32).

[12] See the summary by Johan Gerritsen, "Have with you to Lexington! The *Beowulf* Manuscript and *Beowulf*," in *In Other Words: Transcultural Studies in Philology, Translation and Lexicography presented to H. H. Meier*, ed. J. Lachlan Mackenzie (Dordrecht: Foris, 1989), 15-34 (at 27-31).

[13] Johan Gerritsen, "British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv – a Supplementary Description." *English Studies* 69 (1988): 293-302 (at 295); and further Gerritsen, "Have with you to Lexington!", 25-27.

[14] Frank, "Scandal in Toronto," tackling, R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) and Michael Lapidge, "The Archetype of *Beowulf*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 5-41.

[15] Kevin Kiernan, "The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded *Beowulf*," *Kentucky Review* 6 (1986): 27-44; repr. in *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland, 2000), 195-218 (at 195); compare Carol Symes, "Manuscript Matrix, Modern Canon," in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7-22: "but having survived the hazards of the English Reformation (Grendel) and evaded destruction by the elements (Grendel's dam), it [the Nowell Codex] found a dragon waiting, since the very attentions which the manuscript subsequently received have contributed disastrously to its present state of physical deterioration" (at 8).

[16] Sisam, *Studies*, 64-96 esp. 93-96; Peter J. Lucas, "The Place of *Judith* in the *Beowulf*-Manuscript," *Review of English Studies* n. s. 41 (1990): 463-78.

[17] A full bibliography of the controversy sparked by Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* is beyond the scope of this chapter; Kiernan's own "The *Nathwylc* Scibe and the *Nathwylc* Text of *Beowulf,*" in *Poetry, Place and Gender: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Helen Damico*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2009), 98-131, addresses some recent criticisms.

[18] Kiernan, "Legacy of Wiglaf," 209, counts 350 emendations which editors have introduced into the text.

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