

## *Beowulf*

Old English poem, circa eighth century. For further discussion of *Beowulf*, see *CMLC*, Vol. 1.

### INTRODUCTION

Hailed as the first major poem in English literature, *Beowulf* relates the adventures of its Scandinavian hero, at the same time presenting a detailed description of the life and mood of the age during which it was written. Little is known for certain regarding the author, the date, motivation, or method of the poem's composition. Modern critics continue to debate such issues, focusing on the Christian and pagan elements of the poem, its concern with heroic values, and its formulaic structure. The question of whether the poem's composition was contemporary with the creation of the only known manuscript is also a hotly debated issue among scholars.

### TEXTUAL HISTORY

The original *Beowulf* manuscript dates from 975 to 1025, and is included in a volume containing a total of five works in Old English. Basing this view on historical, linguistic, and stylistic evidence, many critics agree that the poem was composed in the seventh/eighth, or perhaps the ninth century, with the extant manuscript representing a later copy of the poem. In 1731, after joining the manuscript collection of Sir Robert Cotton, the *Beowulf* manuscript was damaged in a fire. A gradual deterioration of letters and words began, although it was stemmed in the nineteenth century. Two transcriptions were made from the manuscript in 1786-87 by Icelander Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin, and are considered invaluable, as they capture portions of the text later lost. These transcriptions served as the basis of the first printed edition of *Beowulf* and are incorporated in modern versions of the poem.

### PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Although the narrative of *Beowulf* is not linear and contains long digressions concerning Geatish and Danish royal history, the basic plot of the poem is easily summarized. Beowulf, nephew to the King of the Geats, Hygelac, learns that a monster known as Grendel regularly raids Heorot, the Danish hall of King Hrothgar. Along with his men, Beowulf travels by sea to Denmark in order to rid the land of the dangerous beast Grendel. Beowulf succeeds, but Grendel's mother then attacks the Danes herself, killing Hrothgar's most trusted man in revenge for the death of her son. After traveling to the monster's underwater lair, Beowulf slays Grendel's mother and is generously rewarded with Danish treasure and acclaim. He then returns to the kingdom of the Geats and relates his triumphs in Denmark to King Hygelac. Later, having distinguished himself in a series of wars with the neighbouring Swedes and Franks, Beowulf is eventually made king of the Geats. Having served fifty years as the Geatish ruler, Beowulf defends the Geats from the attacks of a fire-drake. Abandoned by his men, Beowulf nevertheless pursues the dragon, finally killing it with the help of his loyal retainer, Wiglaf. Beowulf discovers the dragon's treasure, then dies of his wounds. With the lordless Geats facing an uncertain future, Beowulf's people raise a funeral pyre, and the poem ends with the praising of the hero.

### MAJOR THEMES

Scholars have identified numerous themes in *Beowulf*, many related to the portrayal of the Germanic *comitatus* relationship, a code of social behavior stressing the reciprocity enjoyed between a lord and his thanes. In return for protection provided by the lord, the thanes owe service and loyalty. Such themes as order versus chaos and reward and revenge are dramatized through the depiction of this relationship. The role of the monsters also underscores the poet's emphasis on the theme of good versus evil. Other thematic concerns include the role of women in kinship bonds, the use of treasure as a societal bond, the function of the narrator in poem, the nature of heroism and social responsibility, the problem of royal succession, the power of God over history.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Beowulf* scholarship was dominated by debates about the work's unity and form and the relationship between its Christian and pagan elements (for summaries see Bjork and Niles, 1997; Orchard 2003). Many of the poem's first modern readers felt that the present text of *Beowulf* represented a mangled version of an earlier pagan poem or poems, marred by extraneous Christian interpolations and major structural deficiencies. Proponents of 'liedertheorie' (song-theory) attempted to 'disintegrate' the present text in the hope of recovering the pagan 'songs' that were thought to lie behind it. By the mid-twentieth century, however, this approach was abandoned as scholars increasingly came to recognize the work's complex artistry and unique style. Leading the way was J. R. R. Tolkien (1936), who discerned a bipartite structure reflecting the hero's movement from youth to age. Tolkien also rejected the claims of some scholars that the monsters were unfortunate "irrelevances", arguing that they were in fact at the heart of the poem. Norah Chadwick subsequently highlighted the roots of Beowulf's monstrous adversaries in Scandinavian folktale, myth and legend (1959), while S. L. Dragland (1977) explored boundaries between the human and monstrous in the poem. While Tolkien had neglected the figure of Grendel's mother, H. L. Rogers (in Nicholson, ed., 1963) and Jane Chance (1990) highlighted her importance to the work's overall structure and theme.

The poem's unique structure and style continued to attract interest throughout the twentieth century. Adrien Bonjour (1950) defended the inclusion of the digressions on the grounds that they contributed to the development of certain themes in the main narrative. John Leyerle (1967) compared the poem's style with the interlace techniques used in medieval art. Drawing on oral-formulaic theory, John D. Niles (1979) examined the poet's use of ring-composition, while more recently Michael Lapidge compared the work's non-linear mode of narration to that found in some modernist fiction (2001). Francis Leneghan (2020) suggested that the poem's structure revolves around the rise and fall of royal dynasties, emphasizing the importance of legends of the Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings known to the original audience.

The question of the poem's genre has long been a matter of debate: while many have treated *Beowulf* as epic, or "heroic elegy" (Tolkien 1936), Robert Hanning identifies it a "heroic history", a genre in which secular heroes are presented as 'displaced' Christ figures (1974). Attempts to find a central 'theme' have proved equally elusive: one influential study was that of Kathryn Hume, who argued that the poem's main concern was not with the life of the hero but rather "threats to the social order" (1974, p. 5). Joseph Harris (in Fulk, ed., 1991) found poem to be a *summa* of multiple genres, including elegy, battle-poem, flying, praise poem, boast and sermon.

With the search for paganism now largely a thing of the past, scholars have come to view the work as a product of Christian Anglo-Saxon England. Larry D. Benson (1970) investigated the

origins of the poem, proposing that the author amplified certain traditional tales, such as the story of Beowulf the great swimmer, and combined them with legends of the Scyldings. Patrick Wormald (1978) argued that the poem sheds light on the aristocratic culture of Northumbria in the the age of Bede. Rejecting claims that the author's biblical knowledge was limited to the Book of Genesis, Paul Cavill (2004) demonstrated the pervasive impact of both Old and New Testament doctrine on the poem.

In the late twentieth century, the matter of the poem's date of composition became a subject of controversy. Up to this point, scholars had generally accepted that the work was composed before the Viking Age. But now arguments emerged for dates ranging from the seventh to the early eleventh century, with some concluding that the matter was unsolvable (Colin Chase, ed., 1981). More recent studies of language, metre, style and context, however, have seen a swing back to the old view that the poem was probably composed in the seventh or eighth century (Leonard Neidorf, ed., 2014).

The sole manuscript witness to *Beowulf* also began to attract serious interest in the late twentieth century, with Kevin Kiernan proposing that the copying of the text was contemporaneous with the composition of the poem (in Chase, ed., 1981). Andy Orchard (2002) highlighted the distorting influence of generations of scribes, editors and readers on the text we now read as *Beowulf*. Codicological studies have highlighted the relationship between *Beowulf* and the four prose and verse texts that were copied alongside it: Orchard (1985) explored the link between pride and monstrosity; Kathryn Powell (2006) located the copying of the manuscript during the political uncertainty of the reign of Æthelred the Unready; while Simon S. Thomson (2018) examined connections with the reign of King Cnut.

In the past few decades, *Beowulf* has been studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including psychoanalysis, postmodernism, gender, intimacy and affect (Eileen Joy and Mary Kate Ramsey 2006; Overing 2012; Remein and Weaver 2019). Another recent trend is the study of the poem's reception in modern culture, including translations, adaptations and interpretations (Hugh Magennis 2011; Robert E. Bjork 2020).

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Beowulf*. Circa eighth century. MS 975-1025. (Poetry)

### Principal English Translations

*The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf: The Traveller's Song and the Battle of Finnesburh*. Translated by John M. Kemble. London, William Pickering, 1833. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg: A Translation into Modern English Prose*. Translated by John R. Clark Hall. London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1901. Rev. ed. London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1911. Rev. ed. edited by Charles Leslie Wrenn, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1940. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf: A Metrical Translation into Modern English*. Translated by Clark Hall. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1914. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf, the Oldest English Epic*. Translated by Charles W. Kennedy. London, Oxford UP, 1940. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A Verse Translation into Modern English*. Translated by Edwin Morgan. Aldington, Hand and Flower Press, 1952. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf*. Translated by David Wright. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1957. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf*. Translated by Burton Raffel. London, The New English Library, 1963. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A New Prose Translation*. Translated by E. Talbot Donaldson. W.W. Norton, 1966. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf*. Translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland. London, Macmillan, 1968. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A Verse Translation*. Translated by Michael Alexander. Harmondsworth, Penguins Books, 1973. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition*. Translated by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Anchor Books, 1977. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf*. Translated by Albert W. Haley. Branden Press, 1978. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North*. Translated by Marijane Osborn. U of California P and London, Robert Springer, Pentangle Press, 1983. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: An Imitative Translation*. Translated by Ruth P. M. Lehmann. Austin, U of Texas P, 1988. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation.* Translated by R. M. Luizza. Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2000. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation.* Translated by Seamus Heaney. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery.* Translated by Dick Ringler. Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2007. Print. (Poetry)

*The Beowulf Manuscript.* Translated by Robert D. Fulk. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, vol. 3. Harvard, Harvard U P, 2010. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf: A New Translation.* Translated by Meghan Purvis. London, Penned in the Margins, 2013. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary, Together with Sellic Spell.* Translated by J.R.R. Tolkien. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London, HarperCollins Publishers, 2014. Print. (Prose)

*Beowulf: A New Translation.* Translated by Maria Dahvana Headley. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf: In Blank Verse.* Translated by Richard Hamer. London, Faber and Faber, 2020. Print. (Poetry)

*Beowulf by All: Community Translation and Workbook.* Edited by Jean Abbott, Elaine Treharne and Mateusz Fafinski. Leeds, Arc Humanities P, 2021. Print. (Poetry and Prose)

### **Principal English Editions**

*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Edited by Friedrich Klaeber. London, Heath, 1936. Supplemented 1941 and 1950. Print.

*Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment.* Edited by Charles Leslie Wrenn. London, George G. Harrup, 1953. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn fully revised by Whitney F. Bolton. New York, St Martin's Press, 1973. Print.

*Beowulf: An Edition.* Edited by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. Malden, MA and Oxford, Blackwell, 1998. Print.

*Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg, Fourth Edition.* Edited by Robert D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles. Toronto, U of Toronto P, 2008. Print.

*Electronic Beowulf 4.0*. Edited by Kevin Kiernan. University of Kentucky, 2015.  
<https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/ebeo4.0/>. Online.

### **Annotated list of critical essays**

Benson, Larry D. "The Originality of *Beowulf*." *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, Harvard English Studies vol. 1, edited by Morton W. Bloomfield, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 1–43; reprinted in *Contradictions: From Beowulf to Chaucer: Selected Studies of Larry D. Benson*, edited by Theodore M. Andersson and Stephen A. Barney, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1995, pp. 32–69.

[Detailed analysis of the compositional process that lies behind the poem, emphasizing the poet's originality in reshaping traditional materials. Proposes that the author developed the character of the hero from a legend in which he was famed for his swimming exploits, alluded to in the Breca episode.]

Bjork, Robert E. "The reception history of *Beowulf*." *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature*, vol. 25, 2020, pp. 1–19.

[Useful survey of translations, films, plays and other adaptations of the poem.]

Cavill, Paul. "Christianity and Theology in *Beowulf*." *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, edited by Paul Cavill, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 15–40.

[Comprehensive study of Old and New Testament themes, demonstrating pervasive influence of Christian thought on the work.]

Chadwick, Nora K. "The monsters and *Beowulf*." *The Anglo-Saxons—Studies in some aspects of their history and culture presented to Bruce Dickins*, edited by Peter Clemoes, London, Bowes and Bowes, 1959, pp. 171–203.

[Wide-ranging discussion of primarily Norse and Germanic parallels to the monsters. Highlights how the fen-dwelling Grendel, female ogre and flying dragon are all well established in Scandinavian tradition, and explores how the poet adapted these paradigms for a Christian context. Connects Grendel's Mother to the Valkyrie myth.]

Chance, Jane. "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: the Problem of Grendel's Mother." *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, edited by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, Bloomington, IN, Indiana U P, 1990, pp. 248–61.

[Responds to Tolkien's 'Monsters and Critics', highlighting his neglect of the central role of the Grendel's-Mother episode.]

Dragland, S. L. "Monster-Man in *Beowulf*." *Neophilologus*, vol. 61, 1977, pp. 606–18.

[Discusses boundaries between human and monstrous characters. Argues that the primitive and the civilized are closely identified in the poem. Reads the hero as monstrous double for Grendel.]

Hanning, Robert W. "*Beowulf* as Heroic History." *Medievalia et Humanistica*, vol. 5, 1974, pp. 77–102.

[A reassessment of the poem's genre, situating it within the tradition of medieval historiography (e.g. Bede, Gregory of Tours). Highlights poet's use of organizing and linking episodes, as well as pagan characters' ignorance of providence. *Beowulf*, like King Arthur, is a hero who intersects with time but (unlike Christ) cannot change history.]

Hume, Kathryn. "The Theme and Structure of *Beowulf*." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 72, 1975, pp. 1–27.

[Explores scholarly quest for a single, central theme. Highlights poem's lack of interest in hero's inner life or personal development. Argues work is more concerned with threats to social order—namely troublemaking, revenge and war—which are personified by the monsters.]

Lapidge, Michael. "*Beowulf* and Perception." *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 111, 2001, pp. 61–97.

[Analysis of poetic technique, style and form. Drawing on French structuralist theory, compares the poet's non-linear mode of narration with Faulkner and other modernist writers. Highlights poet's inventive use of prolepsis and analepsis to construct and complicate meaning.]

Leyerle, John. "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 37, 1967, pp. 1–17; reprinted in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, edited by R. D. Fulk, Bloomington, IN, Indiana U P, 1991, pp. 146–67.

[Influential study of style, drawing analogy with interlace technique in medieval visual art. Poet uses repetition and variation to create thematic links, overtones, allusions to narrative elements across the work.]

Niles, John D. "Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*." *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association*, vol. 94, No. 5, Oct. 1979, pp. 924–35.

[Drawing on oral-formulaic theory, highlights poet's use of repetition and chiasmic structures.]

Orchard, Andy. "Reading *Beowulf* Now and Then." *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature*, vol. 12, 2003–04, pp. 49–81.

[Technical analysis of scribal errors, editorial interventions and translation. Compares early translations of John Josias Conybeare, William Morris and others. Provides list of scribal corrections in manuscript in Appendix.]

Overing, Gillian R. "Beowulf: A Poem in Our Time." *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, edited by Clare Lees, Cambridge, Cambridge U P, 2012, pp. 309–31.

[Explores poem's relevance to modern readers, focusing on time, space and the body. Highlights the work's essential ambiguity, and argues that the multiplicity of perspectives and possible meanings resonate with, and challenge, modern (and postmodern) sensibilities.]

Powell, Kathryn. "Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf* Manuscript." *Review of English Studies*, vol. 58, 2006, pp. 1–15.

[Identifies a concern with invasion and conquest linking the items in the manuscript and situates this within the context of its possible copying during the reign of Æthelred the Unready.]

Tolkien, J. R. R. 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 22, 1936, pp. 245–95; reprinted in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, edited by Lewis E. Nicholson, U of Notre Dame P, 1963, pp. 51–103.

[Influential study of structure and theme. Rejects theory that poet made a mistake by placing monsters at centre, reading the hero's death in the light of the Norse myth of Ragnarok. Argues that the structure revolves around contrast between hero's youth and age.]

Wormald, Patrick. "Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy." *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: papers in honour of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Bede, given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974*, Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, vol. 46, edited by Robert T. Farrell, 1978, pp. 32–95; reprinted in Patrick Wormald, *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society*, edited by Stephen Baxter, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 30–105.

[Historicist reading which considers the implications of Bede's silence on the Germanic heroic culture described in the poem and the light the poem sheds on the aristocratic world in which Bede lived.]

## Further reading

Baker, Peter, ed., *Beowulf: Basic Readings*. Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England vol. 1, New York, Garland, 1995.

[Collects influential essays by Roberta Frank (on connections with skaldic verse), Stanley Greenfield (the authenticating voice), Gillian Overing (gender), Roy Liuzza (the dating debate) and others.]

Bjork, Robert E., and John D. Niles, eds. *A Beowulf Handbook*. Exeter, U of Exeter P, 1997.

[Essential, comprehensive survey of scholarship. Individual chapters offer helpful chronological summaries of publications on structure, the hero, Christian and pagan elements, myth and history, adaptation, etc.]

Bonjour, Adrien. *The Digressions in Beowulf*. Medium Ævum Monographs vol. 5. Oxford: Blackwell, 1950; repr. 1965.

[Classic study of the poem's digressions. Challenges view that these passages are extraneous, arguing for their essential contribution to the overall structure, theme and tone.]

Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist. *The Art of Beowulf*. Berkeley, U of California P, 1959.

[Remains the most sustained and engaged analysis of the poet's style and form, with chapters devoted to diction, variation, episodes and digressions, anticipation, contrast and irony.]

Chambers, R. W. *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn with a supplement by Charles L. Wrenn, Cambridge, Cambridge U P, 1959.

[A major early contribution to *Beowulf* scholarship, providing detailed discussion of a wide range of analogues and contexts, including sagas, genealogies, folktales and legends. 3rd edition with supplement by Charles Wrenn includes discussion of connections with Sutton Hoo ship burial, discovered in 1939.]

Chase, Colin, ed. *The Dating of Beowulf*. Toronto, U of Toronto P, 1981.

[Opens up question of poem's date of composition, with influential contributions by Roberta Frank (arguing for Viking Age composition based on connections with skaldic poetry), Kevin Kiernan (who connects the copying of the manuscript with the composition of the poem), A. C. Murray (exploring connections with the ninth-century West Saxon royal genealogy) and many others.]

Fulk, Robert D., ed., *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana U P, 1991.

[Combines classic studies by Betha Phillpotts (on *wyrd* and Providence), Tolkien ('Monsters and Critics') and Brodeur ('Variation'), with more recent work by Joseph Harris (genre), Laurence N. De Looze (Beowulf as narrator), Jane Chance (Grendel's Mother) and more.]

Joy, Eileen A., and Mary Kate Ramsey, ed., with the assistance of Bruce D. Gilchrist. *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*. Morgantown, WV, West Virginia U P, 2006.

[Takes an innovative approach to the edited-collection format by juxtaposing key essays by theorists such as Edward Said and Michel Foucault with studies of the poem. Includes historicist and textual criticism (e.g. John Moreland, John D. Niles and Allen J. Frantzen), studies inflected by psychoanalysis and ethnography (e.g. James W. Earl, Janet Thorman, John M. Hill), and analysis of gender and identity (e.g. Clare A. Lees, Mary Dockray-Miller and Shari Horner).]

Leneghan, Francis. *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*. Anglo-Saxon Studies vol. 39. Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2020.

[Foregrounds the royal legends of the Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings known to the poet's audience within which the monster fights take place. Argues that the work revolves around the fates of these dynasties rather than the life of the hero.]

Magennis, Hugh. *Translating Beowulf: Modern Versions in English Verse*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011.

[Provides useful and accessible discussion of style and diction of the Old English poem itself before surveying verse translations from the nineteenth century through to Seamus Heaney. Highlights contrasting approaches to translation, ranging from domesticating to foreignizing.]

Neidorf, Leonard, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*. Anglo-Saxon Studies vol. 24. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014.

[Challenges the prevailing view that the poem is effectively 'undatable', bringing together current work on the poem's language (R. D. Fulk), metre (Thomas Bredehoft, Megan Hartmann) and content with studies of kingship (Frederick M. Biggs), genealogy (Dennis Cronan), religion (Thomas D. Hill) and onomastic evidence (Leonard Neidorf and Thomas Shippey). Collectively these essays make a strong case for dating the work's composition during the seventh or eighth centuries.]

Nicholson, Lewis E., ed., *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*. Notre Dame, U of Notre Dame P, 1963.

[Useful collection of major nineteenth- and early-twentieth century criticism on the poem's structure, theme and the integration of Christian and pagan elements. Includes

seminal contributions by, among others, Hector Munro Chadwick, Levin L. Schücking, J. R. R. Tolkien, Marie Padgett Hamilton, H. L. Rogers and R. E. Kaske.]

Orchard, Andy. *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985. Reprinted Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003.

[Reads *Beowulf* alongside the prose and verse texts that accompany it in the manuscript (*Passion of St Christopher, Wonders of the East, Alexander's Letter to Aristotle* and *Judith*) as well as a selection of Norse sagas and medieval Latin texts. The hero is compared with legendary figures who straddle the line between pride and monstrosity, including Grettir, Hygelac and Alexander the Great. Includes edition and translation of *Liber Monstrorum*.]

Orchard, Andy. *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*. Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2003.

[Detailed survey of critical approaches and trends, with extensive footnotes and bibliography. Provides helpful summaries of key critical areas, including manuscript, style and structure, heroes and villains, religion and learning.]

Reimin, Daniel C., and Erica Weaver, eds, *Dating Beowulf: Studies in Intimacy*. Manchester: MUP, 2019.

[Takes a playful approach to the critical controversies surrounding the poem's dating, foregrounding studies of communities and materiality (Benjamin A. Saltzman, James Paz, Roberta Frank), affect and emotion (Robin Norris), nature and landscape (Mary Kate Hurley, Mo Pareles), space and place (Christopher Abram), as well as a reappraisal of the poem's close relationship to *Andreas*, an Old English verse life of St Andrew (Irina Dumitrescu).

Thomson, Simon C. *Communal Creativity in the Making of the Beowulf Manuscript: Towards a Reception History of the Nowell Codex*. Library of the Written Word vol. 67, Leiden, Brill, 2018.

[Detailed paleographical and codicological study of Nowell Codex (i.e. *Beowulf* manuscript), paying equal attention to all five texts. Defends the capabilities of the compilers, scribes and artists who worked on the project with limited resources and provides fascinating insight into the workings of an English scriptorium in the early eleventh century.]

Whitelock, Dorothy. *The Audience of Beowulf*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1951.

[Among the most important twentieth-century studies of the poem, this short monograph provides a valuable entry point to some of the most enduring debates about the poem. Allowing for a date of composition as late as the second half of the eighth century, Whitelock envisages a Christian audience who viewed the monsters as enemies of mankind. The book also features a discussion of possible connections with the kingdoms of Mercia and East Anglia.]

## PRIMARY SOURCE

[Source: *Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery*, translated by Dick Ringler, Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2007. The layout of Old English verse on the page has long been a matter of scholarly interest and debate. In their manuscript witnesses, the poems are not divided into metrical lines as modern verse is, but modern editors have traditionally split the poetic line into two 'halves', separated by a caesura. Dick Ringler's 2007 verse translation dispenses with this convention, presenting the text in short unrhymed lines. This approach is designed to facilitate oral recitation, with an emphasis on structural alliteration and a measured, two-stress pattern imitative of the original poem.]

We have heard tell  
of the high doings  
of Danish kings  
in days gone by,  
how the great war-chiefs  
gained their renown,  
how Scyld Scefing  
shattered his foes,  
mastered the meadhalls  
of many peoples,  
conquered their kings.  
He came to Denmark  
as a lone foundling,  
but later he thrived;  
his name was renowned  
beneath the skies  
and kings and kingdoms  
across the whale-road,  
the surging sea,  
swore him allegiance,  
paid him tribute.  
He was a peerless king!  
Later the Lord  
of life gave him  
a son who would someday  
succeed him in Denmark,  
a pledge to its people:  
their plight had moved him,  
their time of trial  
and terrible grief  
lacking a leader.  
The Lord bestowed  
success and honor

on this son of Scyld,  
and Beowulf the Dane<sup>1</sup>  
could boast a name  
known everywhere  
in Scandinavia.  
In just such a manner,  
with generous gifts  
from his father's hoard,  
a future king  
insures that one day  
unshrinking friends  
will stand by his side  
if strife should come,  
will support their prince:  
it is praiseworthy deeds  
that win warriors'  
willing allegiance.  
At his foreshaped hour  
Scyld departed,  
grey-haired, vigorous,  
into God's keeping.  
Care-stricken comrades  
carried his body  
to the edge of the sea,  
honoring the wish  
he had made when still  
master of his speech,  
he who had so long  
held the kingdom.  
His ring-beaked ship  
was ready to sail,  
ice-clad, impatient,  
eager for the voyage.  
They laid their beloved  
lord in its hold,  
rested their ring-giver  
in its roomy hull  
near the heel of the mast.  
They heaped beside him  
fabulous wealth  
from far-off lands;  
I have never heard  
of such magnificent things,  
mailcoats and swords

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with Beowulf the Geat, the hero of the poem. Most editors and translators emend the manuscript reading 'Beowulf' to 'Beow', who is given as the son of Scyld in the West Saxon royal genealogy.

and mask-helmets  
and bright war-shields;  
on his breast lay many  
dazzling jewels  
destined to travel  
to the far reaches  
of the flood's domain.  
His men equipped him  
with much more treasure  
than the warriors  
who had once sent him  
wandering the wastes  
90 of the wide ocean,  
alone and friendless,  
a little child.  
Finally the Danes  
affixed a golden  
standard above him,  
let the stream have him,  
the sea-surge take him.  
Their souls were troubled,  
numb with mourning.  
No man on earth,  
not even the wisest,  
can ever know  
or say for certain  
who received that cargo.

When Scyld Scefing's  
ship had set sail,  
leaving behind  
the land of the Danes,  
they crowned Beowulf  
king in his stead  
and for many years  
he remained their leader.  
His highborn son  
Healfdene followed  
and ruled in his turn  
the realm of Denmark,  
fathering four  
famous children  
who were given by God  
to this great war-king:  
Heorogar, Hrothgar,  
Halga the Good,

and a blithe daughter,  
the bride of Onela,  
sweet bedfellow  
of the Swedish king.  
Glory in battle  
was given to Hrothgar,  
fortune in war,  
so his followers all  
obeyed him gladly  
and his band of young  
comrades increased.

(Lines 1-376)