

Patchy Reception

The Riddle of Beowulf

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Beowulf is one of those monuments of literature whose monumental proportions can make it hard to appreciate fully. It is, without question, the finest work of poetry to have come down to us from Anglo-Saxon England. It is also one of the strangest: for all sorts of reasons, it simply should not exist. Yet there it stands enshrined at the heart of the canon of Old English literature. And rightly so, despite the fact it has come to us shrouded in obscurity and silence. As Churchill said of the Soviet Union in 1939, 'It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma'. Even its manuscript setting seems quirky: bound by some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century antiquarians into a codex it shares with an excellent but lesser poem that retells the story of the Old Testament hero Judith, and three scrappier prose pieces, which share a taste for exotic wonders in far off lands and literary qualities that few would set beside *Beowulf*'s. The manuscript text of the poem itself is the serviceable but unprepossessing production of two early eleventh-century scribes, which shows no sign of having enjoyed any special treatment in its day, apart from the late stroke of good fortune that allowed it to survive the Ashburnham House fire in 1731 that destroyed a substantial portion of the manuscripts collected by the antiquarian Sir Robert Cotton.

The silence that surrounds the poem itself in its original Anglo-Saxon setting seems deafening. Clearly the product of a single and singular imagination, it communicates with its early-medieval Christian matrix by means of an extraordinary array of shifts and dodges. The poet references a rich body of Germanic legend in allusions and digressions that assume his audience will be familiar with their backgrounds, but he also alludes to a number of Old Testament episodes, some relatively obscure, such as brief mention in the book of Genesis of the giants who walked the earth before Noah's flood. And he subtly insinuates into the speech of his pagan characters references to a singular 'god' whose providential oversight of human affairs sounds more

like something from the book of Judges than anything plausibly Germanic and pagan. His genuinely sympathetic treatment of his pagan protagonists sets him apart from most of his contemporaries, to whom pagans signified primarily as targets either for conversion or for destruction (usually with the help of a proper saint's intervention) and little else. Perhaps then we should not be surprised that *Beowulf* appears to have slipped under everyone's radar in its original cultural setting.

The modern reception of *Beowulf* has taken its own odd twists. As a graduate student, *geara iu*, at the University of Toronto, I was solemnly informed by another graduate student how, if I could deconstruct *Beowulf*, my career would be made. Well, I didn't and it wasn't, for all sorts of reasons that intersect oddly with *Beowulf*'s own patchy reception history, and I'm going to try to make these intersections the subject (at least peripherally) of the tale I wish to tell here. My brief graduate-school encounter epitomises issues that beset the modern study of an ancient literature or language.¹ Linguistic difference is only the first of many curtains that hang between the student of an ancient poem and the object of his or her study. Reading the history of your discipline, be it ancient art, architecture, religious discourse, philosophy, warfare, funeral practices or numismatics, you can readily discern how every era of its pursuit is shot through with issues, concerns, obsessions and agendas that reflect the scholars' own later age as much as they reflect anything that the *Beowulf*-poet, Dante or Queen Elizabeth I might have recognised.

We can't help where we stand in historical time. Most of the formal methodologies of any historically oriented discipline seek to correct the false perspectives and parochialisms we might suffer as a result. Compounding the difficulties of perspective and temporal remoteness are the peculiar perils of theorising. We can't help modelling, nor can we always resist the lure of the latest shiny new theoretical widget that has just displaced last year's shiny new theoretical widget. Some will remember the days, not that long ago, when expressing any scepticism about the wilder claims of the deconstructionists tagged you as an intellectual flat-earther. Thus my Toronto interlocutor's eager proffer of the intercession of St Jacques. Our models and theories

¹ I speak here out of my experience of reading and teaching Old English literature, but all I have to say bears equal weight in the study of any of the deep past's material remains.

can take on a life of their own, sometimes unrelated to any help they might lend us in the conduct of our disciplines.

Across its modern reception history, *Beowulf* has endured its share of widgetry. In 1936 J.R.R. Tolkien famously took the folklore-and-philology establishment to gentle task (in his ‘*Beowulf*, the Monsters and the Critics’ address to the British Academy), basically for handling a sublime poem like a potsherd and then blaming it for not being a sufficiently *representative* potsherd. In my own day academic arbiters argued for all things patristic and exegetical in the reading and interpretation of *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry. Leaning on their considerable acquaintance with medieval Latin and patristic literature, they assured us solemnly that, yes, sadly, *Beowulf* did succumb to the cardinal sins of pride and avarice at the end and was justly hammered by a diabolically inflected dragon (never mind Grendel and his mother’s far more numerous and telling hell-connections) for his naughty lapse.

Again, there’s nothing wrong with pet theories, as long as they’re properly house-trained and don’t forget their provisional character. I’ve got a few of my own—subject always to sensible correction, I hope, whenever circumstances warrant. These anecdotes are grounded in only the most recent and visible layer of *Beowulf*’s reception history. It is perhaps misleading even to speak of the poem’s medieval ‘reception history’ in the normal sense of that phrase. On the one hand, it certainly had one. At least three scribes found it worth recording, using the costly resources of early medieval scriptoria: the two who copied the extant manuscript and whoever transcribed their exemplar. But on the other hand, we know just about nothing else. The manuscript now known as Cotton Vitellius XV A contains our sole witness to a story nowhere else mentioned or even alluded to. Its hero’s very name, ‘*Beowulf*’, is nowhere else attested and may be as much the poet’s invention as the character it names. This in itself constitutes a considerable anomaly in a culture that tended to recycle characters and narratives.

The more you look at it, the more unlikely *Beowulf* appears. The least controversial estimates of when it was written suggest its author worked well after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, perhaps in the century between 850 and 950. His broad literacy and use of his native tongue point to some time after King Alfred’s promotion of vernacular literacy in his preface to his translation of Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* in the

890s. The Alfredian translation program saw one of the first large-scale turns to the production, translation and transmission of vernacular texts in all of European Christendom. It was driven by the grave disruption of Latin literacy in Anglo-Saxon monasteries, which had been targeted by chronic Viking raiding since the late 700s. Among the first Viking spectaculars was their devastation of the monastery at Lindisfarne, one of the mother-houses of early Anglo-Saxon Christian literacy, in 793. Some used to speculate that *Beowulf* must have been composed before the first Vikings raids, since its protagonists are nearly all the direct or collateral ancestors of the *Dene* who inflicted such havoc on monastic populations. But so sophisticated a work of vernacular poetry could only have taken shape *after* vernacular literacy had been well established in response to Viking depredations.

For the church, of course, pagan business in any post-conversion society was a best a distraction and at worst a pernicious temptation to apostasy. If missionaries could make shift to adapt elements of pagan culture to their promotion of the *evangelium*, well and good. But any other use of pagan thought, symbol or narrative would have courted official disapproval. In a letter written to a fellow bishop only four years after the reduction of Lindisfarne, Alcuin of York bridled at tidings he'd received of Anglo-Saxon monks who preferred heroic poetry to more edifying scriptural or patristic texts for their refectory readings. '*Quid*', he sniffed, '*Inieldus cum Cristo?*' 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' Not a lot in the good bishop's books, evidently. Alcuin might as well have been objecting to *Beowulf* itself. Curiously, the poet included an extended reference to the Heathobard prince Ingeld in his poem, as if in mockery of Alcuin's tetchy rhetorical question.

In short, as far as we can discern the thought that shaped *Beowulf*, it appears to have cut radically across the grain of the culture in which it found expression. At other levels of his linguistic and literary imagination, the poet fine-tunes tricky receptions that we might better call 'negotiations'. In my own reading of *Beowulf*,² I resort repeatedly to the metaphor of 'parallax' to characterise the binocular vision that the poet establishes and balances between his culture's Christian present and the uncanny persistence of its pre-Christian antiquity in its characteristic patterns of speech, thought and imagination.

² *A Far Light: a Reading of Beowulf* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).

To help us orient this central aspect of my discussion in a specifically linguistic context, consider examples from two other Old English poems. The first is the O-stanza from *The Rune Poem*, an alphabetical poem structured around the *futhorc*, the Anglo-Saxon variant of the rune-sequence common to the peoples of northern Europe:³

F	OS byþ ordfruma	ælcra spræce,	10
OS	wisdomes wraþu and witenas frofur, and eorla gehwam eadnys and tohiht.		

The MOUTH is the fountain of every speech,
wisdom's underpinning, wise man's stay,
the inner peace and hope of every man.

In the Scandinavian versions of the runic alphabet, the *futhark*, the same letter is named *ás*, which also means ‘god’, as in *ás-gard* (‘god-dwelling’) and the collective plural form *æsir* used to denote Óðinn, Thor and others of their divine company. Old English has a cognate form, *os*, which means ‘god’ or ‘deity’, but it is never used to name the ‘true’ God of Christianity. In Old English poetry it appears only twice, in ll. 23 and 25 of *Metrical Charm 4* (‘For a Sudden Stitch’):

	gif hit wære esa gescot	oððe hit wære ylfa gescot
	oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot, nu ic wille ðin helpan.	
25	Þis ðe to bote esa gescotes, ðis ðe to bote ylfa gescotes, ðis ðe to bote hægtessan gescotes; ic ðin wille helpan. ⁴	

Were it a shot of the gods, or whether a shot of the elves,
or were it the shot of a witch, I wish now to help you.
This remedy for you against the shooting of the gods,
this remedy for you against the shooting of the elves,
this remedy for your against the witch’s shot; I wish to help you.

³ My discussion of this stanza is adapted from the book I am currently engaged in writing, *The Fetters in the Frost: Reading Old English Wisdom Poetry*.

⁴ Text from *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records vol. 6*, ed. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia UP, 1942). All translations from Old English in this essay are my own.

From the evidence of this charm at least, it would seem that the beings denoted by the word *os* (here in its genitive plural form *esa*, ‘[of] the gods’) had dwindled to languish in the unsavoury company of elves and witches. Here the *gescot* (‘shot’ or ‘shooting’) of such folk-bogeys is adduced as the cause of otherwise unaccountable pains for which the charm was intended to provide relief.

It appears that *os*, a native word indelibly associated with the old false gods, retained enough of its old pagan associations never to have been used to denote genuine deity as understood by Christianity. This led the author of *The Rune Poem* to search for a different meaning to associate with the name of the fourth rune of the *futhorc*. This he found fortuitously to hand in the Latin homophone *os* (‘mouth’), which he characterises as the *ordfruma* (‘origin’) of all speech. A simple physiological fact, yet this identification, by a kind of semantic sleight-of-hand, summons up a Christianised ghost of the original meaning of the Old English word’s *os* (‘god’, ‘deity’), since one of God’s identities in Christian tradition—in particular as the second person of the trinity—is the ‘Word’, in Greek the *logos* of the first verse of the gospel of John (which echoes how the book of Genesis opens its tale of origins): ‘In the beginning was the Word’. Thus has this poet both elided and subtly re-introduced, in a different register, a sign and its possible meanings that pre-date the advent of Christianity in his land. In addition, he has cleverly insinuated the concept of the oral into his meditation on a runic character that served as a sign in the older oral culture out of which the whole Old English poetic tradition emerged.

My second example is one of the more intriguing items among the riddles recorded in the Exeter Book, Riddle 39:

Gewritu secgað þæt seo wiht sy
mid moncynne miclum tidum
sweotol ond gesyne. Sundorcraeft hafað
maram micle, þonne hit men witen.
5 Heo wile gesecan sundor æghwylcne
feorhberendra, gewiteð eft feran on weg.
Ne bið hio næfre niht þær oþre,
ac hio sceal wideferh wreccan laste
hamleas hweorfan; no þy heanre biþ.

10 Ne hafað hio fot ne folme, ne æfre foldan hran,
 ne eagen a hafað ægþer twega,
 ne muð hafað, ne wiþ monnum spræc.
 Ne gewit hafað, ac gewritu secgað
 þæt seo sy earmost ealra wihta,
 15 þara þe æfter gecyndum cenned wære.
 Ne hafað hio sawle ne feorh, ac hio siþas sceal
 geond þas wundorworuld wide dreogan.
 Ne hafaþ hio blod ne ban, hwæþre bearnum wearð
 geond þisne middangeard mongum to frofre.
 20 Næfre hio heofonum hran, ne to helle mot,
 ac hio sceal wideferh wuldorcyninges
 larum lifgan. Long is to secganne
 hu hyre ealdorgesceaft æfter gonged--
 woh wyrda gesceapu; þæt is wrætlic þing
 25 to gesecganne. Soð is æghwylc
 þara þe ymb þas wiht wordum becneð--
 ne hafað heo ænig lim, leofaþ efne seþeah.
 Gif þu mæge reselan recene gesecgan
 soþum wordum, saga hwæt hio hatte.⁵

Writings say this creature is obvious,
 many times seen among the race of men.
 A peculiar power it wields, far greater
 than people comprehend. It will seek out
 5 each and every living thing, then departs on its way,
 never standing still from night to night,
 but without a home it must wander far and wide
 along the exile's path, yet none the more wretched for that.
 It has no foot or hand, it never touches ground,
 10 has neither one eye nor two, nor a mouth,
 nor does it ever speak to men.
 It has no understanding, and writings say
 that it is the most disadvantaged creature
 of all that were ever brought forth according to kind.
 15 It has neither soul nor spirit, but must undertake
 wide journeys throughout this world of wonders.
 It has neither blood nor bone, yet to many men
 across this earth it offers comfort.

⁵ from *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, ed. Bernard Muir (Exeter: Exeter UP, 1994).

20 It never touches heaven, nor is it allowed into hell,
 yet in the teaching of the glory-King
 it lives forever. It would take long to tell
 how its life is appointed to go thereafter—
 the twisting courses of its appointed fate ;
 that is a complex matter to relate.
 25 True is anything that signifies
 about this creature in words. It has no limbs,
 and even so it lives. If you can say
 an answer, with true words, without delay,
 then say what it is called.

The solution to this riddle suggested by Craig Williamson,⁶ ‘to speak’ or ‘the spoken word’, is really the only plausible candidate among the several that have been put forward by scholars over the years. If Williamson’s surmise is correct, then we can see how this poem conducts an extraordinary meta-dialogue between the oral past and literate present of Anglo-Saxon England. Pride of place (if simple priority is any guide) goes to the *gewritu* (‘writings’ or ‘scripture’) that declare the first clue to the riddle’s solution, a creature *sweotol ond gesyne* (‘evident and visible’)—a cheeky enough opening gambit for a riddle whose task is to conceal as much as to reveal its own solution. ‘The answer’s right there in front of you, guys. Why the big mystery?’ These *gewritu* to which the speaker appeals as authorities speak with an emphatic declarative authority. How should we hear it? As flat proposition? Or do these textual authorities pronounce with a hint of smug knowingness, as if the riddle-solution’s plain and self-evident character were somehow a lack? Recall here how the exegetically inflected patristic tradition read texts on as many as five different levels of meaning. Written text, scripture, obliged this tradition by sitting physically still on the page, patient of slow, contemplative reading and rumination, the more conveniently to be exfoliated with all the typological resources available to medieval readers.

To anticipate Riddle 39’s solution, we can contrast this with the spoken word, Anthony Burgess’s ‘puff of air’, evanescent and fleeting. The riddle goes on, in ll. 9-20, to characterise its quarry in terms both negative and fugitive: it possesses none of the

⁶ In *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1977).

common attributes of bodily being (limbs, consciousness, even location in physical space), yet it *traverses* time and space sufficiently to be said to wander widely, in a condition of quasi-exile (ll. 7-9) which, paradoxically, does not disadvantage it at all. Where *does* the spoken word reside? Like light itself, it can never rest. Once spoken it departs from its speaker. Once heard, it is gone, lodged only in the hearer's thoughts like the memory of the dead. Enconced and speaking *ex cathedra* from their exalted stations in manuscripts like the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels or even an edition of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*, is it any wonder that *gewritu* might sound a little sniffy as they characterise their poor relations of no fixed address, the may-fly brief words of spoken discourse?

All good fun. *Remarkable* good fun, if the author of Riddle 39 was consciously establishing so nuanced a play between the oral and literate traditions that formed his dual heritage. When we come to the work of the *Beowulf*-poet, however, we can scarcely miss his deliberate orchestration of this same parallax, in his careful disposition of Christian and pre-Christian elements. Consider, for example, the so-called 'creation song' sung by Hrothgar's *scop* at what appears to be Heorot's inaugural feast:

Ða se ellen-gæst earfoðlice
 þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad,
 þæt he in dogora gehwam dream gehyrde
 hludne in healle. Þær wæs hearpan sweg,
 90 swutol sang scopes. Sægde se þe cuþe
 frum-sceaft fira feorran reccan,
 cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,
 wlite-beorhtne wang, swa wæter bebugeð,
 gesette sige-hreðige sunnan ond monan,
 95 leoman to leohte land-buendum,
 ond gefræt Wade foldan sceatas
 leomum ond leafum, lif eac gesceop
 cynna gehwylcum þara ðe cwise hweorfap.⁷

Then that spirit suffered through
 a wretched time, he who dwelt in shadows,

⁷ All Old English quotations from *Beowulf* have been taken from *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ed. Robert Fulk (Harvard: Harvard UP, 2010). The translations are my own.

as every day he overheard that joy
loud in the hall: there was the sound of the harp,
the *scop*'s clear song. He, who well knew how
to tell the tale from long ago about
the origin of men, related how
the almighty one first shaped the earth, the fair
resplendent plain, defined by the water's embrace.
Triumphantly he set the sun and moon
as lamps to light the dwellers in the land,
and he adorned the surface of the earth
with limb and leaf, and living beings he shaped
of every kind that scurry about alive.

Many readers have noted how this account of the world's creation parallels the account of the same creation in the first chapter of Genesis. In passing we can note as well how the *hel-runa*, the 'intimate of hell's mysteries' as Grendel is named in l. 162a, appears to find such celebration of the true creator's work distressful. The anomaly of a pagan *scop* singing, in so Old Testament a mode, of a glaringly singular god who shapes the cosmos by direct action, is striking. There is no hint here of the ancient Germanic creation-narrative, recorded in the Poetic Edda, in which the giant Ymir's body is dismembered to form different zones of the cosmos. Instead we hear a loose paraphrase of Genesis 1, which has at least two analogues in other Old English poetry. In a poem from the Exeter Book titled *The Order of the World*, the speaker recounts the same creation thus;

ond þis leohte beorht

60 cymeð morgna gehwam ofer misthleoþu
wadan ofer wægás wundrum gegierwed,
ond mid ærdæge eastan snoweð
wlitig ond wynsum wera cneorissum
lifigendra gehwam leoht forð biereð

65 bronda beorhtost, ond his brucan mot
æghwylc on eorþan, þe him eagna gesihð
sigora soðcýning syllan wolde.
Gewiteð þonne mid þy wuldre on westrodor
forðmære tungol faran on heape,

70 oþþæt on æfenne ut garsecges
grundas pæpeð, glom oþer cigð.

And every morning this radiant light

issues forth above the misty cliffs,
 striding over the waves bedecked with wonders,
 flooding from the east at break of day,
 joyful and fair to the generations of men.
 This brightest flame gives light to all who live,
 in which each being on earth may take its joy,
 each to whom the true triumphant Lord
 granted eyes to see. It then departs
 with its glory into the western sky,
 that splendid star processing with its host
 until in the evening it passes beyond the floor of the sea
 and darkness above calls to darkness below.

This poet's account of daybreak, observed by the eyes of rapt, pious contemplation, gives us a splendidly anthropomorphised sun striding like the creator himself across the horizons of the world he himself has shaped. Attended by his retinue, he quickens and adorns the world illuminated by his effulgence. The note of triumphant affirmation rings in nearly identical tones in both these passages, into whose company we can bring the poem known as *Cædmon's Hymn*, recorded in book four of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as part of his account of the miraculous inspiration of the first Anglo-Saxon Christian poet. It too offers its own ecstatic paraphrase of Genesis 1. We should be struck by how closely the song of Hrothgar's very pagan *scop* resembles, not any ancient Germanic creation-narrative, but the songs of these much later Anglo-Saxon *scopas*, all three sounding praise of God's creative *élan* in an unmistakably biblical register.

Nowhere does this de-focused play with scriptural registers figure so richly in *Beowulf* as in the carefully constructed genealogy he confects for his first and most complex monster, the half-human cannibal ogre Grendel:

100 Swa ða driht-guman dreamum lifdon,
 eadiglice, oð ðæt an ongan
 fyrene fremman feond on helle;
 wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
 mære mearc-stapa, se þe moras heold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifel-cynnes eard
 105 won-sæli wer weardode hwile,

siþðan him scyppend⁸ forscriften hæfde
 in Caines cynne— þone cwealm gewræc
 ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;
 ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,
 110 metod for þy mane man-cynne fram.
 Þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orc-neas,
 swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon
 lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald.

(*Beowulf* ll. 99-114)

So that band of men lived joyfully,
 blessed with good fortune, till one began
 to work fell woe, an enemy from hell;
 that harrowing visitant went by the name of Grendel,
 infamous boundary-haunter, who held the moors,
 the fen and its retreats. A monster's abode
 that wretched man possessed for a space of time,
 once the creator had exiled him among
 the kin of Cain—that murder he avenged,
 the eternal lord, in which he'd slaughtered Abel:
 no joy had he of that feud, for the lord then banned him,
 for that wicked deed, far away from men.
 From him all sorts of evil spawn arose,
 trolls and elves and monstrous beasts
 and giants as well, all those who strove against God
 for many an age. He paid them back properly!

His identifying of Grendel as a *feond on helle* ('an adversary [or 'fiend'] in hell') in l. 101b, is pure atmospheric, a generic tagging of his evil. The truly bad news Grendel brings to the Scyldings has travelled by more devious and unsettling paths than any direct ascent from the abyss. At first, in ll. 102-105, he wears the hide of a Germanic water troll, a folk-bogey, a haunter of margins and waste spaces, specifically the fens whose cognitively uncertain landscapes—half water, half dry land, mist-cloaked and never fully discernable—conceal monsters of more or less earthly, if not quite natural, provenance. But the *Beowulf*-poet takes this raw material of folklore and amplifies it to profoundly disturbing proportions. Grendel's ancestors, we learn here and elsewhere in the poem,

⁸ Klaeber and Fulk both leave the ms. reading *scyppen*, which I have emended to its more common form *scyppend* ('creator', which is how Klaeber glosses *scyppen*).

descended from the giants who walked the earth before Noah's flood. Who were these giants, the so-called Nephilim of Genesis 6:4? That text is both ambiguous and curiously vague:

The Nephilim were on earth in those days (and ever afterwards) when the sons of God resorted to the women, and had children by them. These were the heroes of the days gone by, men of renown.⁹

The same verse reads thus in the Old English translation of Genesis:

Entas wæron swylce ofer eorðan on ðam dagum, æfter ðan ðe Godes bearn tymdon wið manna dohtra 7 hi cendon: ða synd mihtige fram worolde 7 hlisfulle weras.¹⁰

And giants existed across the earth in those days, after the time that the sons of God conceived with the daughters of men and they gave birth: those were mighty men, and of great renown.

Rabbinical and patristic authorities (as well as later biblical scholars) have made various shifts to explain these figures. The ancient Hebrew plural *Nephilim* is read by some as an ethnic designator, but it can also mean 'giants'. The text seems rather pointedly *not* to identify the 'sons of God' very specifically, though elsewhere in biblical discourse it is a phrase commonly used to denote angels. That hint of a kind of miscegenation between angel and human gets a fuller airing in the pseudepigraphal Book of Enoch, composed between the third and first centuries BCE and purporting to record the discourses of the biblical patriarch Enoch:

And in those days, when the children of man had multiplied, it happened that there were born unto them handsome and beautiful daughters. And the angels, the children of heaven, saw them and desired them; and they said to one another, 'Come, let us choose wives for ourselves from among the daughters of men and beget us children'. (1Enoch 6:2)¹¹

⁹ *The New Jerusalem Bible*, gen. ed. Henry Wansbrough (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, Ltd., 1985).

¹⁰ *The Old English Heptateuch*, ed. S.J. Crawford, EETS O.S. 160 (London: Oxford UP, 1922).

¹¹ *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

The results are not pretty:

[the daughters of men] became pregnant and gave birth to great giants, whose heights were three hundred cubits. These giants consumed the produce of all the people until the people detested feeding them. So the giants turned against the people in order to eat them. And they began to sin against birds, wild beasts, reptiles, and fish. And then the earth brought an accusation against the oppressors. (1 Enoch 7:2-6)

The depredations of these monstrous offspring (up to and including cannibalism—the text appears to register some of normative Judaism’s horror at the violations of Jewish dietary taboos that their Seleucid Greek governors sought to impose during the inter-testamental period) offer a more detailed enumeration of the generic ‘wickedness’ cited in Genesis 6:5 as God’s reason for setting loose Noah’s flood. The biblical account has likely been redacted and toned down from a background swirl of folklore and popular demonology that imagined fallen angels begetting monstrous progeny upon earthly mothers. These later found a home in the pseudepigraphal Book of Enoch but appear to have been censored by rabbinical authorities who probably found the possibility of sexual congress between angel and human both distasteful and metaphysically suspect. It seems hardly likely that any form of the Book of Enoch itself would have been known in an Anglo-Saxon monastery, though it survives in the scriptures of the Coptic Christian church. We might be able to speculate, however, that its underlying stratum of folk belief may have wandered in many different directions without leaving textual tracks behind it.¹² In *Beowulf*, I think it highly likely that the poet has picked up, from whatever quarter, the idea of those antediluvian giants of Genesis 6 as demon-spawn, progeny begotten by fallen angels upon human women. Thus he can give Grendel a lineage well beyond (and below!) that of a Germanic creature from the black lagoon. This monster’s evil is borne on DNA that descends from the origin of evil itself, from the rebel angels who turned against God’s authority in the deeps of past time. Hrothgar and his poor Scyldings have been battered onto by an adversary, fearsome enough in his earthly marauding, who embodies evil beyond their imagining but fully identified by Jewish and

¹² If this speculation bears any weight, it would serve as another example of how a mostly invisible popular and/or oral tradition might persist to inflect the later life of a far more authoritative and exclusive textual tradition.

Christian authorities as diabolical, and their helplessness against a foe so far beyond their ken would attract, for the most part, the sympathy of the poet's Christian audience. No wonder they could compass no redress, and the poignancy of their plight is a signature flourish of this poet's work.

In his handling of pagan/Christian dichotomies, sometimes the smaller details can be as telling as the larger. In the following brief passage he blends old and new to curious effect:

165 Swa fela fyrena feond man-cynnes,
 atol an-gegea oft gefremede,
 heardra hynða; Heorot eardode,
 sinc-fage sel sweartum nihtum.
 No he þone gif-stol gretan moste,
 maþðum for meotode, ne his myne wisse.

(*Beowulf* ll. 164-169)

And so the foe of all mankind performed
a frequent tale of crime and shameful outrage,
this solitary, horrifying stalker,
in the dark of night infesting Heorot,
the wealth-strewn hall. Yet he was not allowed,
as God ordained, to touch the treasures or the gift-seat,
nor did he know the favour of the judge.

In the poet's own voice, we can only assume he intends the word 'God' to denote the Christian conception of deity that shaped the religious discourse of his time.¹³ What it means when spoken (as it often is) by his characters is another curious matter I haven't the scope to address here. However that be, we are here given an extraordinary tableau, in which Grendel haunts and stalks the floor of Heorot by night, in the midst of which Hrothgar's throne, his *gif-stol* or 'gift-seat' would have stood upon a dais. That prominence, like the altar in a Christian church, would have served as the focal point for the ceremonious life of the hall, which Grendel has shut down by night for twelve dreary

¹³ Modern editors routinely capitalise the word 'God' in Old English poems, along with—less frequently but still regularly—other epithets for deity, reflecting modern typographical sensibilities that had no counterpart in the practice of Anglo-Saxon scribes, who used upper-case letters only for ornament or to mark section or chapter breaks. Our words 'chapter' and 'capital' (as in 'capital letter') are etymological cousins.

years. From that seat Hrothgar would have dispensed the largesse that served as the central nervous system of the heroic ideal: between floor and gift-seat Hrothgar and his men would have exchanged proffers of service and gifts that signalled the regard of each for the other and cemented their solidarity as comrades in arms ready to face all perils on one another's behalf. All this Grendel has shattered. And yet, the poet tells us, 'God' intervenes here to prevent Grendel from approaching that sacral centre of the hall. Grendel is not allowed to 'gretan' (modern English 'greet') Hrothgar's throne. The Old English verb can carry many meanings and connotations: 'touch', 'encounter', 'meet', 'greet', 'salute' and even 'attack' or 'assault', depending on the disposition of the agent who *greteð*.

Though the poet does not (and really cannot) state overtly that the gift-seat of a pagan king might have literally possessed a sacral aura that might have attracted God's patronage, the scene he choreographs in these lines can really mean little else. Only in the Old Testament (the only part of the Christian Bible that the poet alludes to explicitly) could we find pre-Christian heroes who attract God's notice and favour, in characters such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua and David, among many others. Some scholars have suggested that the *Beowulf*-poet may have shaped his story to function like a kind of Germanic Old Testament hero story. Think of David beheading the corpse of the giant Goliath after killing him in a contest in which the young hero eschews the traditional weaponry of his people, much as Beowulf will treat Grendel. If the poet intended anything of the kind, it would constitute an extraordinarily generous gesture toward the Anglo-Saxons' pagan parent culture, which the church (remember Alcuin) dismissed as lost to benighted error and best forgotten in the gospel-light of the post-conversion present.

Having just given his audience such a moment of profound sympathy for the distressed Scyldings, the poet then steps back in the following lines to assess their plight in very much the way that an Alcuin or an Ælfric would have regarded it, the only time in the whole of *Beowulf* that he allows the vantage of his own ninth- or tenth-century Christian present to comment directly on the proceedings:

170 Pæt wæs wræc micel wine Scyldinga

modes brecða. Monig oft gesæt,
 rice to rune; ræd eahtedon,
 hwæt swið-ferhðum selest wære
 wið fær-gryrum to gefremmanne.
 175 Hwilum hie geheton æt hærg-trafum
 wig-weorþunga, wordum bædon
 þæt him gast-bona geoce gefremede
 wið þeod-þreaum. Swylce wæs þeaw hyra,
 hæþenra hyht; helle gemundon
 180 in mod-sefan, metod hie ne cuþon,
 dæda demend, ne wiston hie drihten God,
 ne hie huru heofona helm herian ne cuþon,
 wuldres waldend. Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
 þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan
 185 in fyres fæðm, frofre ne wenan,
 wihte gewendan; wel bið þæm þe mot
 æfter deað-dæge drihten secean
 ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.

(*Beowulf* ll. 170-188)

That was a great agony to the Scyldings' friend,
 a shattering of his spirit. Many sat,
 of those he'd advanced, to take deliberation,
 to ponder counsels, the best course for the brave
 in the face of this sudden horror. At intervals
 they offered to the idols in their temples,
 prayed for their aid against the slayer of souls.
 Such was their practice, their heathen hope—
 to hell they turned in their hearts, not knowing God,
 the judge of deeds, nor able to understand
 the lord God, nor to praise in any way
 the keeper of the heavens, the wielder of glory.
 A woe it is for those compelled to plunge
 their souls into the fire's deep embrace
 because of such ferocious hostility;
 for no comfort can they hope or better turn.
 Well will it be for those allowed to seek
 the lord on the day of their death and then to sue
 for peace upon the bosom of the father.

Here at last we behold sixth-century Danes behaving like sixth-century Danes. Of course they will address their terrors to their notion of deity, which, of course, will be

plural and bogus. Again the poet practices a curious reticence: for once he uses plural rather than singular terms for deity, but none name deity itself but rather its bogus manifestations in the reified forms of physical idols, the ‘graven images’ forbidden by the second commandment of the Decalogue or the altars on which such pagan gewgaws might be erected. They pray at *hærg-trafum* (‘temples’), offering *wig-weorpunga* (‘idol-worship’) in the form of words directed at a singular *gast-bona* (‘spirit-slayer’ or ‘devil’), imploring his aid (ll. 175-177). This is the language of an Ælfric or a Wulfstan or of some idol-busting saint. It is also utterly uncharacteristic of *Beowulf*’s otherwise polite habit of looking the other way when it comes to the raw fact of its characters’ paganism. Across the remaining lines of this passage, the poet laments the fact that the Scyldings, in praying to such impostors, are doing irreparable harm to their own souls. The irony here is both bitter and dark. If, as the poet appears already to have suggested, Grendel possesses demonic ancestry than this is one seriously misdirected distress call, as if someone were to report a house-fire to the local chapter of Pyromaniacs Anonymous.¹⁴

In the end, even as he appears to criticise Hrothgar’s people for their resort to their false ancestral gods, he appears equally to lament the *wa* (‘woe’, l. 183a) that will visit them as a result. And, in the end, he will produce a pagan hero in Beowulf who will, contrary to everything an educated Anglo-Saxon Christian would have known about devils and demonology, resolve the Scyldings’ twelve-year horror by a combination of smarts, fortitude, and physical fighting ability, with, as we shall see, a little help from above that he can neither recognise (beyond calling it ‘God’, whatever the word might have meant to someone of his condition) nor deserve. Once more, our puzzlement can be eased by some reflection on the Old Testament analogy. Though heroes such as Joshua, Samson, Gideon had the backing of the true God, their relationship to him resembles that of other ancient peoples to their tribal deities. In some of the narratives in the books of Judges and Kings, for example, the contentions between God’s people and the surrounding heathen often invoke Yahweh’s need to prove himself mightier than Baal or Dagon or Aseroth, as if those non-entities (according to later Jewish and Christian thought) existed somehow as viable adversaries. Lesser and doomed to defeat, of course,

¹⁴ Donald Trump’s adoption of a crudely populist rhetoric in the recent American elections offers an eerily apt analogue. His rank-and-file supporters still expect him to resolve issues he is likely only to worsen catastrophically.

but of an equivalent order of being. Such narratives probably reflect a much older strata of consciousness and story in which Yahweh was in fact one tribal war-god among many, of a people who later became aware of themselves as *the* chosen people of *the* one God and assembled the eventually vast architecture of Old Testament literature to record and ground that awareness. I suspect this patch of biblical narrative offered the *Beowulf*-poet a ground in which to root his story of noble pre-Christians. His brief description of the burst of sudden illumination that attends Beowulf's later slaying of Grendel's mother certainly points that way:

1570 Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod,
 efne swa of hefene hadre scineð
 rodores candel.

(*Beowulf* ll. 1590-1592a)

A light stood forth within, a radiance strewn,
just as the firmament's candle shines from heaven,
resplendently.

The poet tells us nothing about the source of this unearthly light that floods the underwater lair of Grendel and his mother the moment Beowulf deals her a fatal blow with giant sword he mysteriously found to hand just when it looked as if he would not survive her assaults. Such marvellous lighting effects are a common phenomenon in the kinds of saints' lives known to Anglo-Saxon writers and their audience. The light is described naturalistically, after a fashion: as resembling the brilliance of *rodores candel* ('[the] candle of the heavens', l. 1570a) as it shines from *hefene* ('heaven', 'the heavens', 'the sky'). Both phrase and word are common ways of referring literally to the sun and the sky respectively, yet the celestial associations of the vocabulary and the uncanny circumstances would leave a medieval audience in little doubt about the provenance of this portentous light. Beowulf is being smiled on by heaven (or as near as makes no never mind), nice work for a pagan warrior who never darkened the door of a church.

That giant sword, which came so fortuitously to Beowulf's hand in his moment of need, has its own story to tell:

Hroðgar maðelode; hylt sceawode,
 ealde lafe. On ðæm wæs or writen
 fyn-gewinnes; syðþan flod ofsloh,
 1690 gifen geotende giganta cyn,
 frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod
 ecean Dryhtne; him þæs ende-lean
 þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealde.
 Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes
 1695 þurh run-stafas rihte gemarcod,
 geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht,
 irena cyst ærest wære,
 wreopen-hilt ond wurm-fah.

(ll. 1687-1698a)

Hrothgar spoke; he gazed upon the hilt,
 that ancient remnant. On it was inscribed
 the origin of a struggle long ago:
 how a flood destroyed the race of giants
 whose end was a horror amidst the surging waves.
 That was a race estranged from God almighty:
 the ruler imposed a final retribution
 upon them for their crimes, through water's whelming.
 Thus upon the hilt of shining gold
 it was properly marked in runic characters,
 set down and declared, for whom the sword had first
 been wrought, most excellent iron, with lapped hilt
 and serpent-adorned.

The golden hilt, which is all that remains of the weapon after the blood of the Grendel-kin has reduced its blade to slag, bears ancient runic characters that tell the story of the antediluvian giants and Noah's flood, as if summarised from the Book of Enoch. What should *really* stagger us here, though, is the tableau the poet has staged of overlapping and intersecting literacies. Remember, Hrothgar would most likely have no literacy at all to employ here, not in his own tongue, and even less in the graphic code of the runic characters, whose use was a highly specialised craft practiced only by acknowledged 'rune-masters'. In any event, what language would those runes have

recorded? Biblical Hebrew? The very impossibility of such a question flags up the deep weirdness of this moment. Hrothgar holds in his hand an authoritative account of the very origin of his twelve years' woe. Yet to him, in his pre-literate, pre-Christian heroic mode, it can be only a trophy, a precious golden relic salvaged from his foe's long waited-for fall. No bad thing, but the careful juxtaposition of pre-Christian literacy and illiteracy, under the poet's overarching Christian consciousness that can read the background to the entire story, from before the flood to this moment of triumph in Heorot, must be the most powerful literary meditation I know on the issues raised by the abrupt metamorphosis of Anglo-Saxon culture from its oral, pre-literate beginnings to its lettered Christian latter days.

Beowulf contains many more suggestive juxtapositions of past and present, of oral and textual, and of pre-Christian and Christian consciousness which I can here do no more than point out. To name only two, during the feast celebrating the death of Grendel, we hear Hrothgar's *scop* recount what is now known as the Finnsburh episode (ll. 1063-1159a), at its centre the Germanic pietá of the queen Hildeburh, who loses her brother Hnæf, her husband Finn and her unnamed son in a three-cornered feud between Scyldings, Frisians and Jutes. Her tragedy poses a bitter counterpoint to both the figure of Hrothgar's queen Wealhtheow, herself poised amidst different peoples, happy now but vulnerable to the horror of feud should it break out in her hall, as the poet hints it will. The *Beowulf* poet also tips his hat to his fictional *scop*, a brother in his craft who practices its old skills of hand, head and voice. Other characters in *Beowulf* burst into song as well at key junctures: a warrior riding back from Grendel's mere, after reading the signs of that monster's demise, begins to extemporise on the deeds of Beowulf and those of Sigemund, the legendary Germanic dragon-slayer. The *Beowulf* poet, with all the aplomb of Dante writing of how he was greeted by the great poets and philosophers of antiquity (Homer, Plato and Aristotle foremost among them) in the first circle of his *Inferno*, here has *his* own invention's signal achievement taken up in song by a fictional practitioner of the very art he has inherited from his native antiquity.

To sum up, the *Beowulf*-poet has obviously bequeathed to us something far more powerful than a simple exercise in literary nostalgia. He was not only re-enacting the art of his native forebears, he was channelling their sensibilities with a feel and a finesse

whose power we can sense but scarcely encompass from our present-day perspectives. His reception of his native inheritance amounts to a kind of creative ventriloquism that melds the voices of his pre-Christian past and his Christian present to shape an art that both joins the two and rises above them. His achievement places him among those figures in the English poetic tradition, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickinson and Yeats, who managed to epitomise the cultures of their times while addressing subsequent generations with a power that seems only to increase as the centuries pass.