A Far Light

A Far Light:

A Reading of Beowulf

By

Robert DiNapoli

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This book is dedicated
(in order of appearance)

to

Caz, Jono, Mim and Bec

and to the memory of

Leigh Masel
(1924 – 2013)

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PREFACE

Just don't take any course where they make you read Beowulf.
—Woody Allen, *Annie Hall* (1977)

They [the scriptwriters] kept that carnal kind of Viking era that is in the poem. [Ray Winstone] can tap into the animal side of his humanity. Beowulf is an animal. Nothing about the original poem appealed to me.
—Robert Zemeckis, interviews about his animated *Beowulf* (2007)

The manuscript pages containing *Beowulf* have reached their present safe haven at the British Library after the stormy passage of an entire millennium at least. Even the little we can make out of the poem's origin appears unlikely. It was conceived and executed, as far as anyone can tell, in an early medieval scriptorium. The Christian monastic culture that fostered literacy everywhere it took hold was introduced into Anglo-Saxon England by missionaries from Rome who first arrived in 597CE. By the earliest time *Beowulf* may have been composed, church teaching had been weaning the originally pagan Anglo-Saxons away from their native values and beliefs for at least two centuries. Thus *Beowulf*, a poem peopled by sixth-century pagan Danes and Swedes, would have emerged from its author's imagination as something of a cuckoo in the nest. None of the other vernacular writings that have survived from Anglo-Saxon England is quite like *Beowulf*: the majority are, not surprisingly, religious, either homilies or pious narratives such as saints' lives. The other poem in the *Beowulf*-manuscript is an adaptation of the story of the apocryphal biblical book of Judith.

Despite being accounted one of the most accomplished literary works to have come down to us from those far-off times, at least in the view of many modern readers and scholars, the poem really ought not to exist at all. We do not know its author, though he was clearly a literate Christian of his time, adding a further element of mystery to any consideration of what he wrote and why. After he wrote it, his text had to negotiate centuries of neglect. Its single surviving manuscript, transcribed soon after the year 1000, is an unprepossessing product of the monasteries of that time, its two scribal hands serviceable but unremarkable. It certainly seems to have attracted no greater than usual amount of attention or care. As whole

centuries passed, it sat, probably unnoticed and unread, in the recesses of some monastic library. It became more or less unreadable to anyone born after 1300, as the English language shed several skins to become the language of Chaucer and Langland. Before it became the language of Shakespeare, however, England's monasteries found themselves shaken up, more viciously than a modern university being taken over by practitioners of the dark arts of marketing and management, when Henry VIII broke with Rome over the matter of his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Henry saw England's monasteries as nests of traditional (and potentially treasonous) Church resistance to the changes he was inaugurating. He also saw the great wealth they had accumulated during their centuries of collecting tithes and endowments from rich patrons. It proved an irresistible combination, and what historians now call the 'dissolution' of the monasteries followed.

Amidst the flotsam of that shipwreck, the stores of literature and learning held in the monastic libraries were thrown open to interested parties other than monks and their abbots. Much may have been lost, but much was taken up by collectors of rare books and manuscripts, who were allowed to fossick among the rich pickings. The manuscript containing *Beowulf* eventually found its way into the collection of Sir Robert Cotton (1570-1631), whose considerable library came to house many rare early medieval manuscripts.[1] His collection was donated to the nation by his grandson in 1702 and transferred for safekeeping to the ominously named Ashburnham House, near the present houses of Parliament in London. In one of life's little ironies, Ashburnham House was badly damaged in a 1731 fire which consumed up to a quarter of its holdings. The Old English poem whose hero dies fighting a fire-breathing dragon almost perished in that later blaze. The edges of its manuscript were badly scorched, though most of the text survived more or less intact.

After that close call, the *Beowulf*-manuscript became the ward of the new British Museum, founded in 1753, and later the British Library, where it now resides. During the nineteenth century, the text of the poem began to receive considerable scholarly attention from a number of interested parties, none of them all that interested in the poem as a poem. Linguists and historians dominate the first generations of modern *Beowulf*-scholarship, their studies often inflected by concerns that led them away from the poem in its own literary and historical context. Some German scholars, for example, responding to the nineteenth-century consolidation of Germany as a modern nation-state, sought literary evidence in *Beowulf*

[1] A more detailed account of these events and the reception-history of *Beowulf* can be found in my Afterword.

of an ancient Germanic folk-spirit on which to found a modern sense of German identity. Practitioners of the newly prestigious discipline of comparative philology sought out its wealth of early English word-forms. Historians of many persuasions studied *Beowulf* as a historical document, like an artefact from an archaeological dig, that might offer concrete examples of sixth-century life and culture.

As a work of literature, *Beowulf* has fared a bit better since the turn of the twentieth century. Its language, Old English, found a firm (if ultimately transient) purchase in the curricula at many major universities, and high-profile scholars such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Tom Shippey and Fred C. Robinson (among many others) have championed and articulated its power as a poem that engages existential concerns far wider those of its immediate milieu. As the Allen and Zemeckis quotations with which I began suggest, it's even become a pop-culture victim of its own success as a pillar of the traditional canon of English literature. The first volume of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* has always featured it in translation, originally by the noted medievalist E.T. Donaldson and more recently in the poet Seamus Heaney's luminous rendering. But the forced exposure of generations of students to this oddball of early medieval literature, taught in translation, more often than not by instructors with little specialist knowledge of either the poem or its milieu, has not always proven a happy encounter. The poem did not light up for me at our first contact in just such a circumstance—as clearly it did not for Woody Allen. Only after I'd conceived an interest in Old English, the original language of *Beowulf*, did I find myself able to enter into what has proven a long fascination with this poem and its uncanny music of language and meaning.

As for Robert Zemeckis, his ghastly animated adaption proudly exhibits all the ignorant stereotypes and prejudices about the Middle Ages that tend to beset modern attitudes. The swilling, grunting, vainglorious louts who people Zemeckis' frat-house version of the mead-hall Heorot, chanting 'Hroth-*gar*! Hroth-*gar*!', like supporters of Donald Trump's bid for the U.S. presidency, would have been shown the door by the hall-wardens of the original text's Hrothgar pretty sharpish. An informed reading of what that anonymous poet actually wrote, so precariously preserved through centuries of chance, neglect and near-disaster, can still reveal to modern audiences a culture of stunning vitality and nuanced sensibilities, and it tells a story of both rousing adventure and devastating ironies, well beyond the reach of a director of hyperkinetic action films like Zemeckis.

In October of 1999, I heard Seamus Heaney read from his then just-published translation of *Beowulf* to an audience of students, scholars and other interested readers at Manchester Metropolitan University. As a still youngish part-time lecturer in medieval English literature at a number of English universities and as an enthusiast for Heaney's poetry, I had come to hear him in a state of heightened expectation. Two elements of that performance have stuck with me ever since. The first will surprise no one familiar with Heaney's manner: he was a superb public speaker, especially in the warmth and good humour with which he could infuse any audience, and he was in fine form that day, gently mocking the scholarly niceties of some professional Anglo-Saxonists who, especially in England, had tut-tutted at what Heaney liked to characterise as the 'post-colonial mayhem' he'd inflicted on *Beowulf* by deploying some snippets of ripe Ulster dialect in his translation. The second involved a senior member of that academic tribe, charged with introducing Heaney, who'd done so with cool diffidence, admonishing us that, of course, it was *impossible* to translate *Beowulf* into modern English. Given the Nobel committee's award of its prize for literature to Heaney only four years previously, it was a nice question whether the poet or his master of ceremonies was thus playing the cheekier chappie on that evening.

The warm poet and the cold scholar have remained with me as archetypal figures ever since. Scholar and poet pursue different agendas, driven by different energies. To the traditional scholar, an ancient poem such as *Beowulf* is a manuscript artefact to be curated, analysed and presented with only the greatest circumspection. Above all else, NOTHING MUST HAPPEN TO IT—the merely curious and the playful pose impertinent risks to its integrity, like rowdy schoolchildren in a museum, and must be kept behind barriers at a safe distance. To the interested poet, however, an ancient poem is, above all else, a *voice*, warm with human breath and messy with equally human foible. Her concern will be to allow it to speak again in some fashion that her contemporaries can hear and understand. The two *need* each other, as Heaney was quick to acknowledge: without the scholar's rigour, the poet risks veering into new-age fantasies and approximations, while the scholar, deprived of the poet's linguistic *élan*, will quickly turn embalmer.

Heaney's translation is easily the best of any published during the twentieth century. Yet it has its limitations. I can report, as someone familiar with the original Old English of *Beowulf*, that Heaney's modern rendering comes nearer than any other I know to giving the reader not familiar with Old English the experience of encountering the original. To achieve this Heaney has had to translate very freely at points, which has,

ironically, left the result less useful for anyone who might wish to consult it as an aid for reading the original. A further concern for me, as someone who has spent decades teaching Old English poetry, is that, with all the good will, intelligence and linguistic facility in the world, no translation can, on its own, convey all the historical and cultural backgrounds modern readers need to grow familiar with if they are even to begin to fathom this poem's depths. Annotations and articles of the kind found in the Norton critical edition of Heaney's translation, while helpful up to a point, can't give a fully joined-up account of how the poet has orchestrated the manifold ambiguities, subtle allusions and digressions that shape the overall effect of his poem. A full account of what this poem achieves must weave a dance of supplementary sense and elucidations of cultural nuances in and around the poet's text. It would have to account for how *Beowulf* hums with a subjunctive churn of possible meanings and resonances, some plausible, some less so, some clearly intended by the poet, others part of the inadvertent spray of possibility that leaps up from any contact between such a poem and the minds of its hearers or readers. This is the task I have set myself in the broad play of commentary I have orchestrated in the following pages.

The passing years eventually took me and my family from England to Australia, where in Melbourne I managed to eke out a string of further part-time contracts, teaching literature at a number of different tertiary institutions. Slowly and inevitably, as I aged and the entire academic landscape tilted awkwardly under my feet, such contracts grew ever scarcer and, eventually, disappeared altogether. At one university where I had previously been employed to teach Old English, I found myself running an Old English reading group begun by a graduate student and colleague, after a curriculum re-shuffle had axed all the Old English units I'd once taught. Its participants were undergraduates and others from the wider university community. Begun in early 2011, the group continues to meet weekly as of this writing. We have translated and discussed the whole of *Beowulf*, a good bit of it twice, at a relaxed (some would say glacial) pace over several years. The group has proven a startling success: freed from the arbitrary constraints imposed by semester-scheduling and the oppressive grind of assessment, we found ourselves rewarded with an experience of the poem that few can have had in a 'proper' university setting. For all the attendees—and equally for me, who have had many more years' acquaintance with this poem—that experience has opened up insights into and further questions about this remarkable text that have made its study a perpetual delight. The companionship of the group and

its warm reminders of all that had initially inspired me to become a medievalist in the first place lifted my spirits whenever the new world of the hyper-managed, commercially streamlined, neo-liberal university threatened to drag them down. We have become, in Old English terms, a proper *dryht*[2] of sorts. I will always feel a great debt of gratitude toward all the participants whose support and encouragement have inspired and sustained me. During the early years of the group's existence, as I was adjusting to the grim realisation that no university would ever again pay me to teach Old English, the thought came to me (rather like Hrothgar's sudden inspiration to build his mead-hall, Heorot: see ll. 64-73) that I might try to record something of our deliberations in written form. The other members of the reading group pressed me to try, Cambridge Scholars Publishing responded favourably to my proposal, and this book is the result.

As this very foreshortened account of its genesis might suggest, *A Far Light* is not entirely a technical or scholarly study. In writing it, I have sought to reproduce the relaxed ambience of our reading group sessions. The elusive play of potential meanings that swarm around the poem's literal denotations have been the reading group's endlessly engaging quarry. Thus I have imagined an audience of curious readers with little formal expertise but with a love of language and the aesthetic patterning of sound and meaning it allows. My 'research' for *A Far Light* has been my decades of reading, reflection and teaching: in that way this book does constitute an informal *summa* of such career—partial and interrupted—as I have had. It records my encounter, as a student, as a reader and as a teacher across some thirty-five years, with one of the most uncanny and powerful works of English literature I know. In these harsh latter days, institutions of higher learning have for some time been circling their wagons, and quondam English departments, rebranded as Departments of Cultural This and Theoretical That, have long been tossing many traditional subjects to the wolves. Those managers and marketing experts collect professorial salaries in droves while professorial ranks are thinned and old notions of the humanities are held up either for private derision or for web-site advertising copy (with all the sincerity of which ad-copy is capable). Out of such fraught times, this book is also my message in a bottle, to a tomorrow when I can only hope some kind of sanity will have returned to a stricken scene. Like the desolate Geats at Beowulf's funeral, I can't discern better times ahead in any foreseeable future, but the years are long, and Dame Fortuna fickle for good as well as for ill.

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[2] See the Glossary of Key Terms for a definition. After the Glossary is a roll of everyone who has attended the reading group's sessions.

INTRODUCTION

THE GHOST SHIP: LITERARY BACKGROUNDS

Þa gyt hie him asetton segen gyldene
heah ofer heafod, leton holm beran,
geafon on garsecg; him wæs geomor sefa,
murnende mod. Men ne cunnon
secgan to soðe, sele-rædende,
hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng.

Moreover, high above his head they stood
a gilded ensign; then they let the sea
bear him up, consigned him to the waves.
Their hearts sank, their spirits flagged in mourning.
No man was able to speak the truth of it—
no hall-wise counsellor, no warrior
beneath the skies—who received that freight.

(*Beowulf* ll. 47-52)

Thus an Anglo-Saxon poet of the ninth or tenth century ends his brief account of the life of a sixth-century Danish king, Scyld Scefing.[1] Scyld's funeral raises the curtain on the poem's main matter, the life of its fictional hero Beowulf, whose own funeral provides its final scene some three thousand lines later. What both separates and connects the two funerals is a complex web of stories that dramatise an ideal of conduct and social organisation that took hold among the peoples who dwelled beyond the northern flank of the Roman empire at its height, their tribal zones surrounding the 'two seas': the North Sea and the Baltic. Long after Rome's collapse, they would coalesce into the national and ethnic

[1] *Scyld* means 'shield' and would have been pronounced to rhyme with 'shilled', with an initial *sh*-sound and a slight rounding of the lips on the vowel. *Scefing* would have sounded something like 'shaving'.

identities we associate with Germany, the low countries and Scandinavia. In the centuries just after Rome's departure from the scene, however, those used to life within its sphere of influence passed through a time of increased instability and forced movement that marked them deeply. Known as the 'Age of Migrations' to historians of the period, it resulted in a westward drift of populations, including the continental Angles, Saxons and Jutes who went on to colonise the former Roman province of Britannia and thus became the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons. Their literary culture, some centuries later, produced the poem we now know as *Beowulf*. This is one strand among several in the DNA of a poem whose backgrounds include Germanic folklore, Old Testament narrative and even a glancing acquaintance with Virgil's *Aeneid*. Traces of practically the whole of Western literature are present in embryo among the 3,182 lines of alliterative verse that constitute *Beowulf*.

Great living and great dying cram the spaces of the poem between Scyld's and Beowulf's funerals. Indeed, as they were understood among the peoples of early Germanic Europe, the heroic life and the heroic death dominate the poem's imagination, played out against a literary and historical landscape about which we can speculate in broad detail, while our grasp of many particulars remains scant and patchy. There is a great deal we do not and cannot know. The sixth-century milieu of its narrative remains a zone of much conjecture and uncertainty among historians, and the poem's own later genesis remains a mystery none has resolved entirely convincingly. For a time, historians looked to literary artefacts such as *Beowulf* for historical evidence that might shed light on those dark centuries. But our uncertainty about how well a ninth- or tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poet might have recalled the social and political exigencies of sixth-century Scandinavia complicates attempts to take any element of *Beowulf* as documentary history.

As to who wrote it, and where and when he worked, we can again only speculate, not entirely blindly but without much hope of finding a definitive answer. 'Him'—the maker of this work—I shall call simply 'the *Beowulf*-poet'. Some of our guesses about him appear solid enough, though few claim universal assent among modern scholars and readers. He was most likely a devout Christian. Among earlier generations of *Beowulf* scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars of a romantic bent preferred to imagine the poem's author as an authentic pagan *scop*,[2] a professional poet-minstrel like those we will see in *Beowulf* performing the creation-song in the first days after the

[2] See the Glossary of Key Terms for translations and explanations of Old English words and specialised modern terms used in my commentaries.

completion of Hrothgar's great mead-hall Heorot (ll. 89b-98), or later the tale of the tragic denouement in the feud that claimed the lives of the Frisian king Finn and much of his kin (ll. 1071-1160b). To imagine *Beowulf* as the work of such a *scop*, you'd have to imagine further how his work could have been dictated to the monks who eventually transcribed it. Given the breadth and subtlety of his allusions to other texts, he would have to have been a highly literate *scop*, with access to one or more monastic libraries and enough understanding of basic Church teaching to make sophisticated use of their holdings. In the end, it's hard to escape the conclusion that the *Beowulf*-poet simply *was* a monk.

At the same time, he could scarcely have been a wholly orthodox monk, and his poem forces us to ask a number of hard-to-answer questions. The biggest of these is how this Christian poet valued the pagan Germanic past, a version of which he has set as a stage for his characters. In one sense, he is writing what we might now call a historical novel, the narrative evocation of a past reality no longer present to its audience. Yet our modern concept of 'history' as an objective account of past events did not yet exist in the Western literary imagination, not in Beowulf's time and not in the poet's. The eighth-century English churchman known to us as the Venerable Bede began the practice of divvying up the past across a running tally of years preceding and following the incarnation of Christ. Before that, the past was a matter of what you remembered, supplemented by what your parents and grandparents could tell you and the legends and myths preserved by your people. In late Classical historiography, the tenures of tribunes and emperors served as common reference points. Elements of this practice survive into the early Middle Ages in areas subject to Roman influence. Beyond these, any sense of history and cultural identity was preserved by popular tradition and the narratives fashioned by *scopas*, such as those we see and hear practicing their art in *Beowulf*. By any plausible time of *Beowulf*'s composing,[3] Bede's new way of year-counting would have begun to take wider hold, but it would not yet have wholly displaced the old memories in common reckonings. The past would have had a *feel* that did not depend on mere number.

That is one small aspect of a far greater issue that any reading of *Beowulf* must wrestle with from its first lines to its last. Its Christian author has taken up a hero, a matter and a setting all from deep in his own pagan past, centuries before any whisper of Christianity would have reached the lands of the Danes, the Swedes or the Geats—the three Scandinavian peoples most involved in the action of *Beowulf*. That past,

[3] The dating of the composition of *Beowulf* remains much in contention among scholars; I will discuss the issue and its implications in brief shortly.

to an Anglo-Saxon Christian, would comprise both a still-vivid collective memory, buttressed by the verbal productions of the *scop*, alongside a biblical and Mediterranean past, Latin and literate, that would have devalued the native oral inheritance as so much dead wood and useless lumber. The poet's own Christian and monastic culture took a dim view of the Anglo-Saxons' native pagan culture, which it had largely displaced. By the time *Beowulf* was composed, the church had become well established in Anglo-Saxon England. The missionaries dispatched from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great in 597 and their successors in the church they established quickly set about suppressing the beliefs and values of the peoples they converted, from Kent to Northumbria. After some initial triumphs and setbacks, their efforts met with solid and startling success: apart from the names of some weekdays[4] and place-names[5] and the odd, often seasonal, village tradition or folk-belief such as may-pole dancing and the Green Man,[6] all traces of the beliefs and attitudes which the pagan Angles, Saxons and Jutes had brought with them across the North Sea appear to have passed from common memory, within only a few generations of the first conversions. As a result, we know extremely little about the values, beliefs and assumptions that governed the world-view of the first Anglo-Saxons. How a pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon perceived himself as a human being, or how she responded to the wider cosmos and saw her place in it, we have almost no idea.

That said, one element of the pre-Christian traditions of the Anglo-Saxons that *did* survive, by a fluke of literary and ecclesiastical history, bears closely on every aspect of *Beowulf*. We know that the early Germanic peoples preserved much of their cultural and historical memory in the form of oral poetry. This was composed and preserved by a class of professional minstrels or bards, called, in Old English, *scopas* (singular *scop*). Their work often involved the commemoration of their noble patrons' triumphs, but along the way their work would also have preserved the memory of customs, practices, ideas and beliefs common to the people for whom they sang. We know they performed to a harp of some sorts, and that, as in other European languages, the OE words for 'poetry' and 'song' are almost synonymous. The Anglo-Saxon *scop*, like the *poetes* of Homeric tradition, appears to have been a highly esteemed singer of songs.

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[4] *Tiwesdæg* ('the day of Tiw', our Tuesday), *Wodenesdæg* ('the day of Woden', Wednesday), *Þunorsdæg* ('Thor's day', Thursday), and *Frigesdæg* ('Frig's day', Friday)

[5] for example, Thursly (<medieval *Thorsle*, 'grove of Thor'), Thursford (<*Turesfort* 'giant's [OE *þyrs*] ford'), or Wednesbury (<*Wadnesberige*, ('Woden's stronghold')

[6] who gets his own magnificent fourteenth-century literary makeover in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

How the *scopas* fared after the conversion, however, is a mystery. Given their role in the preservation of cultural memory, they would traditionally have enjoyed some kind of privileged status that may have allowed them to practice their art for some time afterward. But the church's root-and-branch reform of Anglo-Saxon belief and culture would no doubt have isolated and devalued such figures. In the end—before very long I imagine—they would have been put out of work, for want of a more elegant phrase. We know at least one eighth-century Anglo-Saxon churchman, Alcuin of York, objected to the reciting of traditional secular poetry in monasteries. How far that disapproval spread through the general culture we cannot say, but it was sure to make itself felt in time. The *scopas* would have represented a locus of alternative cultural authority and historical memory, and the early medieval church, when it came to its promotion of orthodox belief, was not exactly a multi-culturally aware institution.

Yet the outlook for native vernacular poetry was never entirely bleak. Some poetically-inclined monastics found ways to adapt their native poetic traditions to acceptably pious purposes. This resulted in the survival of a substantial body of poetic texts in Old English, the largest *corpus* of vernacular poetry from the ninth and tenth centuries in all of Europe. Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* tells the story (familiar to anyone who's ever studied Old English literature) of Cædmon, the illiterate stable-hand in the great Northumbrian monastery of Whitby who was miraculously visited one night in a dream, by a figure commonly thought to have been an angel, at whose command he burst forth in a hymn praising God's creation of the cosmos, in Old English, his native tongue. Bede, who of course wrote in Latin, gives a Latin paraphrase of the poem now known as *Cædmon's Hymn*, which has also been preserved in Old English versions in several other manuscripts. We do not know for certain whether the Old English texts of *Cædmon's Hymn* record literally the poem remembered by Bede and his contemporaries, or whether they are a later reconstruction from Bede's Latin paraphrase. Even if the latter were the case, the Old English poem as we have it is a remarkable performance.

The poem contains many epithets and cognomens for God; as I transcribe it below, as in all my transcriptions throughout *A Far Light*, I resist the modern typographical convention of capitalising such surnames for deity. In this, apart from the word 'God' itself, I am following Anglo-Saxon scribal practice, which never capitalises names and other proper nouns. In nearly all the surviving manuscripts, capitalisation is used only for ornament, or as a means of marking a textual boundary, i.e. in words or

whole lines that mark paragraph, section or chapter divisions. The modern English words 'capital' and 'chapter' are etymological cousins. In my transcriptions, here and from Fulk's text of *Beowulf*, I silently restore the manuscript's lower-case spelling of words and phrases denoting deity, though I retain the modern capitalisation of words beginning sentences and names of persons and places, since its absence would distract present-day readers. The word 'God', also not capitalised in Anglo-Saxon scribal practice, presents peculiar difficulties in this regard, which I will address *in situ.* As will be seen, the deep ambiguity with which the *Beowulf*-poet invests his characters' notions of deity resists easy resolution, and to pre-judge the question by a modern typographical convention seems an impertinence. Here, at any length, is the Old English version of *Cædmon's Hymn*:

> Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,
> meotodes meahte ond his modgeþanc,
> weorc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,
> ece drihten, or onstealde.
> He ærest scop, eorðan bearnum,
> heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend.
> Þa middangeard, moncynnes weard,
> ece drihten, æfter teode,
> firum foldan, frea ælmihtig.
>
> Now we must praise the guardian of heaven,
> the might of the ordainer, and his deep thought,
> the deeds of the glory-father, how the eternal lord
> established the origin of every wonder.
> For the children of earth he first shaped
> heaven for a roof, the holy creator.
> Then mankind's guardian, the eternal lord,
> next shaped the world, the earth for men, almighty prince.

Although we can't assess exactly how factual Bede's account of Cædmon's experience might be, that story of the illiterate and tone-deaf stable-hand's miraculous conversion to pious poet signals a profound cultural shift that certainly did take place at some point. *Cædmon's Hymn* is essentially a praise poem, of the kind a pagan *scop* of the old school might have composed for his lord to commemorate a victory. Its vocabulary is that of the mead-hall, that focal space of the heroic tradition of which *Beowulf* will have much to tell. Its nine lines marshal six

honorific epithets for God, two of them repeated. Of these, at least three—*weard* ('guardian'), *drihten* ('lord'), and *frea* ('lord,' 'prince')—are used regularly in other texts to refer to human rulers. In *Beowulf* they commonly denote the kings of the Danes, Geats, Swedes and other peoples mentioned in that poem. *Cædmon's Hymn* repeats *'weard'* and '*drihten*' once each. The other epithets, though less redolent of earthly, human lordship, still refer to royal functions such as government and judgement. *Meotod* means something like 'judge' or 'one who ordains', and though the conception of God as father is at least as old as Christianity itself, *fæder* still sounds a distinctly human note here. Cædmon's God raises the heavens as a roof for all humankind like Hrothgar raising his resplendent hall Heorot to shelter his own people. The relevance of all this for *Beowulf* lies in the evidence *Cædmon's Hymn* provides for the way certain Anglo-Saxon poets adapted their native poetic tradition to the new and unprecedented array of beliefs and ideas introduced into their culture after their conversion. God becomes a celestial *cyning*, heaven his everlasting mead-hall, angels and faithful believers his *ealdormenn* and *þegnas* whom he rewards lavishly for their good faith and service. The values and central images of the traditional poetry of the old Anglo-Saxon aristocracy were re-valued to represent the very different world posited by early medieval Christianity.[7]

The primary importance of this revaluation to *Beowulf* is that, quite simply, without such a transformation very little vernacular poetry, if any, would have been recorded using the costly resources of an Anglo-Saxon monastic scriptorium, certainly not a poem celebrating secular ideals of heroism rooted in a pagan warrior-aristocracy. Medieval texts were written on pages of vellum, a highly treated form of cow- or sheep-hide whose manufacture involved a great expense of labour and materials. The vellum for a moderately large book might require as many as two hundred cow-hides to produce. Imagine, if printer paper cost one hundred dollars a page, what hard judgments we would have to make about what was worth printing. The poets who retold biblical narratives in Old English verse, or those who cast the lives of certain saints (some of them local heroes such as St Guthlac) into the traditional heroic metre, legitimised the use of those metres and the distinctive vocabulary associated with them in texts copied and preserved on that costly vellum.

One of their crowning achievement is the luminous lyric known as *The Dream of the Rood*, whose speaker relates his dream of the cross of the crucifixion, which tells him its story, representing itself as a loyal retainer

[7] A detailed study of this transformation can be found in Alvin Lee's 1972 *The Guest-Hall of Eden.*

of its lord, Jesus, who suffers death not as a passive victim but as a young Germanic warrior-lord wading into battle on behalf of all humankind. The cross tells how it obeyed its lord's command to 'stand fast', thereby serving as the instrument of his crucifixion, which is the occasion both of his death and of his transcendent triumph over death. The poem thus paradoxically inverts the demands of the heroic ideal as a way of communicating to an Anglo-Saxon audience the paradox of life's triumph in death, so central to all Christian teaching.

Beowulf, on the other hand, is technically a 'secular' text, in that it does not take up any of the religious stories or concerns that preoccupy most Christian productions of the early middle ages, such as saints' lives, biblical commentary and homilies. Nonetheless, I put 'secular' in quotation marks here for good reason. The language and imagery of *Beowulf* suggest its author was a literate Christian, who composed his work in imitation of the pagan *scopas* of old. He makes a number of telling references to the Old Testament, but his story is set in a pagan Germanic past, among the peoples of what are now Denmark and Sweden. Why such an author, probably a monastic, should have devoted such effort to a narrative that casts an elegiac and admiring glance back over a pagan past his church regarded as unsalvageable is, for us, an unanswerable mystery. He deliberately and repeatedly juxtaposes his characters' pagan sensibilities against those of his own time to establish a poignant irony that colours the whole of *Beowulf*: its most admirable characters, whose heroism represents the height of their own culture's values and aspirations, remain doomed in the eyes of the church that has lent this poet the tools of literacy with which he has commemorated their deeds for all time. Why he has done so, and exactly how far his sympathy for them extends, are issues to which my discussion will return many times through the pages that follow.

Across his work, the poet choreographs ironies that explore a kind of parallax he establishes between his pagan matter and his later Christian sensibilities. These are visible from *Beowulf*'s earliest scenes. In the brief passage I've quoted at the beginning of this introduction, the dead Scyld lies arrayed on his funeral bier in a ship. Ship-burial was in fact a regular way of dispatching the illustrious dead among the pagan Germanic peoples of the North Sea and Baltic littorals, but it involved either setting the ship on fire as it was consigned to the water, or its inhumation underneath a barrow. Examples of the latter have preserved much archaeological evidence, as in the ninth-century Swedish Gokstad ship or the seventh-century artefacts recovered from the Sutton Hoo ship-burial discovered in Suffolk. Simply setting such a ship adrift would have made no practical

sense, but in this passage in *Beowulf* it allows the poet to express the poignant ignorance of these pagans about the post-mortem world so authoritatively explicated by later Christian teaching. Has he arranged the scene specifically to illustrate the inferiority of pagan culture to Christian? The tone of the passage, with its evident sympathy for the Scyldings' grief and loss, would seem to suggest otherwise. Its sober restraint helps it to suggest a noble pagan stoicism the church had little interest in commemorating. The metaphysical darkness Scyld's people confront here appears to ennoble them even as, from the poet's later Christian perspective, it condemns them to a fatal ignorance that will result in their damnation. But like Beowulf by the end of the poem, Scyld has proven something of a saviour-figure in life. Both men have laboured mightily on their people's behalf and achieved much. Even if, *sub specie aeternitatis*, such triumphs must dwindle to evanescent makeshifts, this poet, for reasons best known to himself, insists nonetheless that they be admired and celebrated.

Some Technicalities: Dating and the Text

We do not know when *Beowulf* was first composed. The manuscript in which the sole text of the poem survives was copied late in the Anglo-Saxon period, during the early decades of the eleventh century. It appears to have been copied from an earlier text of the poem which has not survived, and we cannot know for certain how many stages of copying may lie behind that penultimate transcription. Scholars argue over earlier or later dates for the poem's origin, without clear result, so any discussion of *Beowulf* must allow for the possibilities of early or late composition. Its author was writing either within memory of a living pagan past, or an unknown number of centuries after the disappearance of a pagan antiquity he re-creates like a modern historical novelist. To know which was the case would lend greater confidence to our assessments of his work, but like Scyld's mourners we must carry on in relative ignorance on this point and allow for a play of possibilities.

The Old English text I present here is taken from *The* Beowulf *Manuscript*, edited and translated by R.D. Fulk,[8] an edition that incorporates the most recent codicological study of the manuscript. It is, in effect, the text of the fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, which Fulke co-edited,[9]

[8] Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010).
[9] *Klaeber's* Beowulf *and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th ed., ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: U of Toronto P,2008).

but presented in a more reader-friendly layout, without the swarms of diacritical marks used in that edition. Fullk's layout follows the universal modern practice of presenting the two half-lines of each verse separated by a visible gap, meant to represent some sort of 'caesura' or pause that are believed to have separated them in performance. Across this caesura the one or two alliterating words in the first half-line call to or summon up the single alliterating word of the second half-line, thus binding the two half-lines into the basic metrical unit of all surviving Old English poetry.

The Translation

In the following pages, I offer the full text of *Beowulf* in short quotations of the original Old English, followed by my translation and commentary. In the preparation of my translation I have consulted Fulk's prose translation as well as the verse translations by Howell D. Chickering, Jr.[10] and Seamus Heaney.[11] My aim has been to produce a metrically loose blank-verse rendering, not necessarily literal but close enough to the original to allow a reader not familiar with Old English to follow something of the flow of image and thought in the poet's words. It is customary among honest translators to concede at such a point as this that translating is no exact art and that decisions they have made might have been made very differently by another. Consider the point so conceded. Old English poetry pursued a music of its own, dependent on its own distinctive phonology, much of which changed radically as Old English metamorphosed into modern English. Those changes, as well as the many others in vocabulary, syntax and semantics, render all attempts at modern translation approximations at best. Since my main concern in producing my translation has been to encourage readers unfamiliar with Old English to explore its distinctive way of conducting its business, I have sought to keep my translation as straightforward as possible, which ought have made my task a little easier, but even so I faced a great many hard choices, where a simple literalism proved out of the question. I comment on most of these in my discussions of the passages where they have occurred. I will leave it to others to judge how well my resulting lexical, semantic and metrical shifts have worked.

[10] Beowulf: *A Dual Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977).
[11] *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

Assumptions

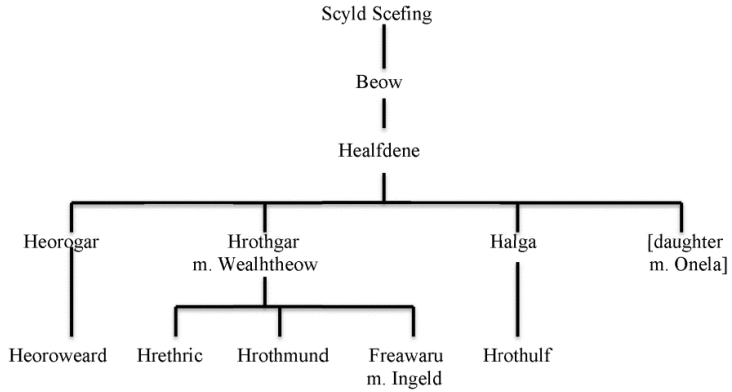
My commentary rests on a few underlying assumptions that have been the subject of on-and-off debate by generations of scholars. Most of these I've already mentioned, and, by and large, they reflect the present-day scholarly consensus. But as not all are universally accepted, I list them here together, as the initial axioms of my approach to *Beowulf*:

1. *Beowulf* is the work of a single author, who I shall refer to as 'the *Beowulf*-poet'.
2. The author was himself an educated and well-read Anglo-Saxon Christian, and his poem reflects, in broad terms, the values of his early medieval Christian milieu.
3. At the same time, the *Beowulf*-poet displays a profound regard for an idealised vision of the Germanic pagan past from which Anglo-Saxon culture descended, a pagan past which the prevailing culture of his time had either quietly laid to rest or forthrightly devalued.
4. *Beowulf* reflects, in almost every one of its 3,182 verses, its author's deliberate juxtaposition of the pagan antiquity of his narrative against the very different history and cosmology his own culture had assimilated through its conversion to Christianity. The unique parallax thus established, unlike anything we encounter in any other medieval text, affords the poet considerable scope to dramatize his deep sympathy for the noble but doomed pagans who populate his tale.

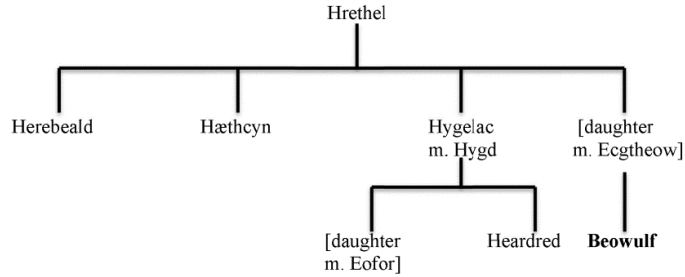
Here I can only flatly state these assumptions as a courtesy, all but the first of which tend, among scholars, to beg a tangled mare's nest of questions. These I defer to my commentary, where I will address them, repeatedly, as the *Beowulf*-poet's own words open more promising avenues of reply.

THE MAJOR HOUSES IN *BEOWULF*

The Scyldings (in what is now Denmark)



The Geats (in what is now southern Sweden)



The Swedes