Neidorf, Leonard. 2023. *The Art and Thought of the "Beowulf" Poet*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Pp. 216. ISBN 9781501766909.

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In the field of Old English literature and language, the sheer volume of scholarship on the poem *Beowulf* is so dauntingly great that simply gaining a usable awareness of much of it requires a substantial investment of time and energy. Gazing out across a vast Beowulfian bibliography, many students may with some relief seize on the notion that Tolkien's essay of 1936 marked a new turn toward, or even a beginning for, the modern literary study of *Beowulf*—a notion that comes with the quiet implication that pre-Tolkienian work on the poem can be safely consigned to the cabinet of curiosities. To be sure, it is easy enough to find studies on *Beowulf* from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that are arguably of limited relevance to modern scholars (not to say far-fetched). Yet there is also work from this period that remains of potentially considerable interest when brought back out of the dark and reexamined in the light of nearly a century of additional scholarship. This is largely the approach of Neidorf's monograph *The Art and Thought of the "Beowulf" Poet*. Readers familiar with this scholar's various previous publications may well be expecting dense philological arguments—coupled with combative approaches to opposing viewpoints—focused on matters related to the compositional date of the *Beowulf* poem. None of this, however, comes to the fore here. Rather, this book seeks to understand what makes *Beowulf* so unlike the kind of narrative that it is, paradoxically, so frequently considered to epitomize: the heroic legends of Germanic-speaking Europe in the Migration Age.

As Neidorf emphasizes from the outset, the heroic legends of pre-Christian Germanic Europe—variously preserved more or (usually) less completely in texts of medieval provenance in Old English, Old Norse, and Old or Middle High German—tend to focus on protagonists whom Fate places in impossible situations from which they have no honorable escape but rather only an obligation to choose between different but always hateful courses of action. Their options are most usually choices between kin-slaying, oath-breaking, or both with the fallout from whichever choice generally leading to the (often relatively inglorious) death of the perpetrating protagonist. Yet, none of this is present in *Beowulf*'s main narrative, and Neidorf turns to—and subsequently builds on—Phillpotts (1928), who treats this (still) often overlooked discrepancy. In essence, Phillpotts argued that the (Christian) *Beowulf*-poet (perhaps not unlike Alcuin) personally disapproved of the kin-slaying, oath-breaking heroes that populated Germanic heroic legend, yet was reluctant to abandon or retcon stories and settings presumably still familiar to audiences of the day. However, rather than fashioning or retelling a traditional heroic narrative, the poet instead chose to build the main story of *Beowulf* around an admirable folkloric monster-slayer who also carefully navigated the currents of human politics, rising to become a king in his own right and achieving lasting fame in the defense of his people rather than through a grim dedication to committing

atrocities forced on him by the vagaries of Fate. As Neidorf emphasizes, Phillpotts's original argument concerns not the poet's *what* or *how*—in terms of theme, unity, or structure, the great concerns of post-Tolkienian *Beowulf* scholarship—but *why* the poet crafted the tale of Beowulf as they did.

Neidorf's monograph is, then, in many ways a continuation and elaboration of Phillpotts's almost century-old yet still relevant arguments that *Beowulf* can be considered a remarkable poem not because it represents a literary reworking of traditional narratives, but—quite the opposite—because it was an innovative poem by an idiosyncratic poet who not only dispensed with the traditional focus on the trials and tribulations of kin-slayers and oath-breakers but who instead foregrounded an admirable and largely inoffensive crypto-monotheistic hero whose eloquent and courteous speeches and dialogue (with, for the most part, equally admirable and inoffensive members of the poem's supporting cast) take up a considerable fraction of *Beowulf*'s word-count. Neidorf breaks his main arguments out into three thematic areas identified in the titles of the book's three main chapters "Kinslaying and Oathbreaking," "Courtesy and Courtliness," and "Monotheism and Monstrosity," bracketed by helpful orientation in the "Introduction" and "Conclusion" chapters.

The first chapter addresses the traditional heroic legendary themes of kin-slaying and oath-breaking—and it is Neidorf's elaboration of Phillpotts's argument that it was precisely these traditional themes that the *Beowulf*-poet wished to avoid that forms the book's central premise. Not only does Beowulf himself avoid such activities (traditional for Germanic heroes, but inappropriate for good Christians) in the course of his career, Neidorf argues (27–28) that, in the mortally wounded Beowulf's final speeches (ll. 2736b–2743a), the poet has him specifically emphasize that he "did not go looking for unwarranted aggression, did not swear multitudes of oaths in injustice" and that "the ruler of men need not accuse me of the murder of kinsmen." The implication that the Christian God would frown on kin-slaying (while Germanic gods seem to have had no real role in judging mortal behaviors) may be particularly significant. Traditionally, kin-slaying and oath-breaking were tragic circumstances forced on a hero by Fate, though Neidorf again suggests (30–31) the *Beowulf*-poet's revisionist views are illustrated in Beowulf's prediction (ll. 588b–589) of Unferth's eternal reward for killing his own brother: "you will suffer damnation in hell, clever as you are."[1]

As a replacement for such traditionally expected sources of narrative drama as kin-slaying and oath-breaking, Neidorf argues that the poet instead emphasizes Beowulf's status as a monster-fighter—a more appropriately Christian activity for a hero, monsters being, as Tolkien might have agreed, in this context the enemies of God. Tolkien might also have recognized that monsters were likewise the enemies of the pre-Christian Germanic gods, though it must be admitted that the heroes of Migration-Age Germanic

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[1] Here it should be emphasized that Neidorf accepts the reading *helle* "hell" in l. 588b rather than *healle* "hall." The manuscript here is illegible, and the reading *helle* depends on the transcript made by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín's copyist c. 1790. Though adopted in most modern editions, *helle* is not uncontroversial, and several scholars have preferred *healle*; see, for example, Robinson (1974, 119–37) and Orchard (2003, 253). In the context of discussing heroic vs. Christian heroism, the debate over "damnation in hell" vs. "condemnation in the hall" perhaps deserved further discussion. That said, however, Unferth in fact seems a person of good standing in this particular hall, and a Germanic hero might well be driven to the choice of slaying a kinsman rather than (for example) betraying their oath to their lord. Indeed, it is precisely one's resolution in the face of such choices that defines the Germanic hero—but not, at least perhaps in the estimation of the *Beowulf*-poet, an appropriately Christian hero.

legend do not seem to have pursued this activity with much zeal. Though the legendary Norse hero Sigurðr is famous for slaying the dragon Fáfnir, his German analog Sîvrit's status as a dragon-slayer is barely mentioned in the *Das Nibelungenlied*.[2] We are hard-pressed to find further examples from Migration-Age Germanic legend, though they appear, perhaps significantly, with greater frequency in Christian hagiography and later medieval secular legends. The theme of monsters and their relevance to Christian heroes is then taken up most fully in the book's third chapter, where Neidorf notes that Grendel, as a descendant of Cain, seems particularly understood as a divine adversary. In contrast, Grendel's mother, though no less a descendant of Cain, is described more in bestial than diabolical terms. *Beowulf*'s dragon—apparently unlike the Norse Fáfnir—also seems to fall more into the category of the bestial, and Neidorf notes Rauer's arguments (2000) that *Beowulf* is indebted to hagiographical tropes in which a dragon's depredations provoke a saint's (or, in this case, a folkloric hero's) intervention on behalf of a threatened population.

Returning to the book's second chapter, focused on the notion of courtliness, Neidorf follows scholars such as Jaeger (1985), Nelson (1989 and 2003), and Barthélemy (2007) in recognizing that a concern for courtliness in the sense of "a class-specific ideal of social life, focusing on the self-restrained conduct of the noble protagonist and analyzing the social forms of courtly life that display magnificence, refinement, power, and status" (64), long predates the high-medieval period with which it is commonly associated. Perhaps the most telling point is the sheer amount of space the *Beowulf*-poet gives to interactions and speech in court or in the presence of people of the court—far more than to scenes of action and combat. Traditional Migration-Age Germanic heroes can likewise indulge in lengthy conversation, though perhaps principally with contending with adversaries or rivals. Beowulf, however, is notable in conducting himself and his speech in ways that showcase his knowledge and capability in the highest social circles; we also get relatively lengthy displays of eloquence from characters who define those circles, such as Hrothgar and Wealtheow, as well as Hygelac.[3] Indeed, Neidorf emphasizes the significance of the complex interplay of monologue and dialogue between Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Wealtheow as an elegant discussion of the relative pros and cons of

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[2] The somewhat later *Der Rosengarten zu Worms* (version A) and substantially later *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid* both give more attention to this hero's dragon-slaying activities—though, in any case, a dragon remains his only monstrous foe (and not one that he seems to have pursued as any kind of public service).

[3] With reference to Hygelac and the whole vexed matter of the poem's portrayal of the so-called Swedish-Geatish Wars, here is where scholars may doubt the notion of a Beowulf untouched by traditional legendary heroic baggage of blood feuds and broken oaths. Though interpreting the web of events is fraught with challenges, it seems as though Beowulf at least fails to protect Hygelac's son Heardred, slain by Onela, and then becomes king of the Geats himself with at least Onela's tacit acquiescence—though Beowulf then later seems to be at least party to Onela's slaying. Yet though numerous scholars have essayed (often contradicting) explanations, Earl's observation (2015, 53) that there are "no definitive answers" is difficult to contest. It may well be, as Earl indeed suggests, that the poet was inserting the character of Beowulf into an existing legendary background (on which, at least concerning the matter of the Swedish-Geatish Wars, the poet may themselves have been hazy). It may simply be the case that one cannot insert a new character into a legendary Migration-Age backdrop for very long without them becoming complicit by association with the feuds of the pre-existing characters. Nevertheless, at the risk of greatly expanding the book's text by tackling these complex issues, further discussion of how Beowulf's participation in the Swedish-Geatish Wars should be understood in relation to his proposed role as a hero untainted by the traditional kin-slaying, oath-breaking habits of Migration-Age heroes might be welcome.

nominating Beowulf as heir to the throne (with all eventually coming to agree that it would hardly be appropriate—though neither could the poet probably insert Beowulf onto a Danish throne where the audience knew he didn't belong).

In the concluding chapter, Neidorf offers a concise summary of the arguments in the preceding three, main chapters, and also attempts to anticipate potential objections against them. The principal value here is not so much any specific objections that Neidorf raises to combat—as the range of opinions and interpretations of *Beowulf* is so wide that any number of better or worse objections might be raised—but the model of the exercise for the reader. *Beowulf* is a dense poem, and numerous arguments might well be raised for or against Neidorf's main theses. Perhaps, precisely because Neidorf is largely elaborating on arguments (not least Phillpotts's) that have so long sat in the shadows, Neidorf's conclusions—and the book as a whole—offer fertile ground for new generations of scholars to re-examine these issues. Ultimately at issue here are wider matters of what kind of thing the *Beowulf* poem is and why it is like it is. Of especial interest is the issue of what was *heroism* for an early medieval audience—this being something perhaps very different than what modern audiences imagine "heroism" to be—and how its definition, or responses to its definition, changed as culture and society itself changed. Whether one is inclined to accept Neidorf's arguments or not, these issues are arguably as relevant for modern audiences, if in different ways, as they were for medieval ones. Neidorf's *The Art and Thought of the "Beowulf" Poet* presents these pertinent if less commonly (or recently) considered themes in a readily understood and thought-provoking way, making this—in a world not short on *Beowulf* scholarship—a book on *Beowulf* well worth reading.

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