

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

Beowulf in the Twentieth Century

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WHEN I FIRST CONCEIVED my title ‘*Beowulf* in the Twentieth Century’, my hybristic intention was to touch on all major aspects of the scholarly study of *Beowulf* over the past ninety-six years and to attempt a summary statement of where matters stand today and of where study of the poem needs to go in the next century. The unfeasibility of such a project soon became apparent, however, as did its superfluity in view of Eric Gerald Stanley’s recent and wide-ranging assessment of the field in his book *In the Foreground: Beowulf*.¹ I therefore reconceived the word *Beowulf* in my title as referring exclusively to the text of *Beowulf* and thought to review how that text has fared at the hands of editors and textual scholars in the twentieth century; but growing awareness of the dimensions of even this more modest endeavour soon led me to focus my attention on the one edition of the poem that has emerged as our century’s standard edition—Friedrich Klaeber’s *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*² as it was progressively revised throughout the first half of this century and then widely received as virtually canonical in most of the second half.

Before I take up this subject, however, allow me to return for a moment to that more grandiose prospect of *Beowulf* scholarship that

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¹ Cambridge, 1994.

² Boston, 1922; London 1923; 2nd edn., 1928; 3rd edn., 1936, reissued with supplements in 1941 and 1950. My ensuing quotations from *Beowulf* are from this edition unless otherwise indicated. Quotations from other Old English poetry are from G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 6 vols. (New York, 1931–53).

had tempted me when I was first honoured with the invitation to deliver this Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture. Any mention of the British Academy's distinguished series of Gollancz Lectures will inevitably bring to mind that turning-point in *Beowulf* studies in the twentieth century, the delivery just sixty years ago this week of J. R. R. Tolkien's Gollancz Lecture of 1936, a performance which I daresay will never be equalled, certainly not this afternoon. Thanks in no small part to '*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*'³ the poem has attained in our century the status it deserves in English literary studies the world over. Approbation will never be universal, of course; superficial acquaintance with the text has left some readers with the impression that *Beowulf* says little more than that

Terribly unimportant kings
Grimly gave each other rings.⁴

But informed and thoughtful readers of the poem have, with Tolkien's firm guidance, seen very much more in the poem than that. Although bedeviled at times by curiously dualistic approaches to the poem—oral or written, early or late, pagan or Christian, allegorical or literal—scholarship and criticism in the twentieth century have, on the whole, increased vastly our sense of an established text and of the poem's place within its culture as that culture has been revealed through studies of its archaeological remains and its literature, religion, and art. Crucially important pieces of information like *Beowulf*'s date and place of origin and the identity of its author remain, it is true, elusive, and the resulting frustration has provoked some to form desperate hypotheses founded tenuously on overinterpretation of the small residue of evidence available to us, while others, lapsing from the true way of rationality and patient endeavour altogether, have turned to voodoo numerology for quick answers. Few are the scholars who have turned down these paths, however, and, happily, fewer yet are those who follow them.

Nowhere has twentieth-century *Beowulf* scholarship shown itself more hot for certainties than in the quest for an established text of the poem, and this brings me to my topic today. Our century has seen many editions of the poem, and there are still more in preparation. But few will deny that one edition has dominated and continues to dominate our century—Friedrich Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*,

³ *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), pp. 245–95.

⁴ John Hollander, 'The Four Ages', 1–2, in *Harp Lake* (New York, 1988), p. 14. The couplet is in the context of a fifty-seven-line poem and should not be taken to represent this learned poet's actual assessment of the contents of *Beowulf*.

which first appeared in 1922 and was steadily revised until the third edition with supplements appeared in 1950, four years before Klaeber's death in Berlin at the age of ninety-one. One American scholar has characterised the almost unquestioned supremacy of this edition as 'the Klaeber consensus'⁵—a tacit understanding among Old English scholars that the main problems presented by the text of *Beowulf* have been solved by Klaeber and the general shape of the poem determined once and for all by his edition, the long shadow of which even falls chillingly on subsequent editions of the poem. Even E. V. K. Dobbie's painstaking edition prepared as part of the standard published corpus of Old English poetry⁶ made little progress toward dethroning Klaeber, in part, no doubt, because Klaeber's edition managed to serve as a popular classroom edition while simultaneously providing a summative account of the textual scholarship that preceded it.⁷ In any case, it is Klaeber, by and large, that scholars continue to teach in their classrooms (especially in the United States) and to cite in their publications.

One might well ask, however, 'What's wrong with a "Klaeber consensus"?' His edition is the result of half a century's planning, execution, and thoughtful revision by a scholar of great learning and sound judgment. Shouldn't we acknowledge that with this edition we have arrived at a satisfactory text of the poem and turn our attention to other problems? It will occasion little surprise that my answer is 'no'. In what follows I should like to review with you some of the ways in which Klaeber's text has, I think, tended to fix and limit our thinking about the poem's text, sometimes without our being fully aware of it. And occasionally I shall propose alternatives to some of his decisions. My conclusion will be that we need to look beyond the Klaeber consensus.

In his introduction to 'The Text' (p. [cxc]) and in his appendix on 'Textual Criticism' (pp. 274–8) Klaeber spells out many of his editorial

⁵ Raymond P. Tripp Jr, 'Recent Books on *Beowulf*', *Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association*, 2 (1985), 1–26.

⁶ E. V. K. Dobbie (ed.), *Beowulf and Judith*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. 4 (New York, 1953).

⁷ I am not suggesting, of course, that textual scholarship on the poem ceased with Klaeber's edition. Continuing challenge and debate on problem passages are registered dramatically in, for example, Robert J. Hasenfratz, *Beowulf Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography, 1979–1990* (New York and London, 1993), pp. 403–7 and Birte Kelly, 'The Formative Stages of *Beowulf* Textual Scholarship: Part II,' *Anglo-Saxon England*, 12 (1983), 239–75. But new textual studies usually begin by citing Klaeber's reading, and when later scholars quote passages from *Beowulf*, they usually quote from Klaeber's text with his original readings intact despite all the subsequent challenges that may have been made to them.

procedures, but some important matters are left vague or not even mentioned. He speaks briefly and generally, for example, about what he calls ‘the somewhat uncertain matter of punctuating’ (p. [cxc]), and yet his punctuation has guided generations through the poem, influencing at every turn their assessment of style and meaning. Let me cite one illustration of how great the difference between editorial punctuators can be. In A. J. Wyatt’s 1898 edition of *Beowulf*⁸ there are a total of eleven exclamation points, while R. W. Chambers’s edition of 1914⁹ has only ten. Klaeber’s edition has fifty-five. Whether Klaeber’s hyper-exclamatory *Beowulf* results from the editor’s having been German or his having been a punctuational hysteric we cannot say with certainty; but we may be sure that the insertion into the poem of all this stylistic emphasis has profoundly affected our reading of *Beowulf*, and it has also influenced later editions.

In yet another way his edition silently predetermines our perception of the narrative structure of the poem. Spaced throughout his edition, signalling (presumably) what he takes to be different stages of the narrative, are indentations. These typographic devices and their principle of application are nowhere discussed in Klaeber’s edition; they simply appear like some kind of textual *donnée*. Most earlier editions of the poem—Kemble’s, Schaldemose’s, Thorpe’s, Grundtvig’s, Heyne’s, and Grein’s¹⁰—did not presume to depart from or add to the structural divisions supplied in the manuscript itself—the fitt divisions.¹¹ It was Etmüller’s edition of 1875—an edition which takes many

⁸ *Beowulf* (Cambridge, 1898).

⁹ *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment* (Cambridge, 1914).

¹⁰ These editions were published, respectively, in 1833, 1847, 1855, 1861, 1863, and 1867. For bibliographical details see Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson, *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1980), items 1633–8.

¹¹ Following a fifty-two-line unnumbered section, the poem is segmented into fitts marked with a capital letter at their beginnings and numbered one through forty-three—with two anomalies: fitt thirty-nine has no number (but everyone agrees that it begins at line 2821, where the scribe has a small capital letter at the outset), and between fitts number twenty-eight and thirty-one there is a long, 181-verse stretch of text, but no fitts are marked. Klaeber, like those before him, handles this second anomaly in an arbitrary and unconvincing way. He confidently assigns fitt-number twenty-nine to the beginning of line 2034, where there is a capital *O* and then declares that the scribe simply lost count or forgot about fitt thirty. But approximately midway between fitt twenty-eight and the presumed fitt twenty-nine there is another capital letter—at the beginning of verse 1999. Surely the logical procedure would be to supply number twenty-nine at the first capital (line 1999) and number thirty at the second capital (line 2034). The presumed fitt twenty-nine (at line 1999) comes at the beginning of a *maEelode* formula. Since nine of the other fitt-numbers come at the beginning of a *maEelode* formula, there is good reason for assuming that this is where fitt twenty-nine began.

liberties with the text (such as excising 286 long-lines not to the editor's taste) which introduced editorial indentations, fully 156 of them, along with an arbitrary breakdown of the poem into two major sections, Part I and Part II.¹² Thereafter Holder, Harrison, Holthausen, Sedgfield,¹³ and others use editorial indentations, and Klaeber adapts them to his purposes in his edition, which has 106 of them. Once introduced, the indentations seem to take on a life of their own. Dobbie in his edition submissively retains eighty-two of Klaeber's 106 indentations, while the two most recent editions of *Beowulf*, appearing in 1994 and 1995,¹⁴ both preserve ninety-two of them. These structural markers, which have no authority whatever from the poet or the manuscript, seem now to have attained virtually canonical status—and without any editorial comment or explanation of their use. They have the effect of artificially recasting the poem into a series of verse groups of varying length somewhat like the *laisse* divisions of the *chansons de geste* and *The Cid*. But *Beowulf* is not *The Cid* and not a *chanson de geste*.

While we are thinking of the way in which scholarship can sometimes build unauthorised interpretation into the text of a poem, let us reflect for a moment on the poem's title, which is of course a modern invention pure and simple, Old English poems being almost always untitled in the surviving manuscripts. The French poet Mallarmé thought that poems should not have titles because titles are too overwhelming.¹⁵ By this he seems to mean that titles anticipate the poem with too much interpretation before we experience the text. However, scholars have never shared such scruples, as the history of poem-naming shows. Epic poems, for example, have been named either for a hero (*The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Song of Roland*) or for a people or a place (*The Iliad*, *The Nibelungenlied*, *The Kalevala*). The earliest titles assigned to *Beowulf* were of the latter type. In 1790 John

¹² Ludwig Ettmüller (ed.), *Carmen de Beóvvulfi* (Zurich, 1875). Ettmüller ignores the fitt numbers altogether

¹³ See Greenfield and Robinson, *A Bibliography of Publications*, items 1641, 1642, 1648, 1649, for bibliographical details.

¹⁴ George Jack (ed.), *Beowulf: A Student Edition* (Oxford, 1994) and Michael Alexander (ed.), *Beowulf* (Harmondsworth, 1995).

¹⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Réponse à des enquêtes sur l'évolution littéraire* (1891) in Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (eds.), *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1945), p. 869: 'Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois-quarts de la jouissance du poëme qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve.'

Pinkerton calls the poem ‘a romance on the wars between Denmark and Sweden’,¹⁶ and Thorkelin entitles the *editio princeps De Danorum rebus gestis*, a title which is not altogether inappropriate if we ascribe to the proper noun *Dani* the generalised sense ‘Scandinavian’ which it can have in Old English and Anglo-Latin.¹⁷ With Sharon Turner, Grundtvig, and Conybeare, however, references to the poem emphasise the role of the hero,¹⁸ and when Kemble gives his 1833 edition the title *Beowulf*, he settles the issue once and for all.¹⁹ I think, however, that we should reflect from time to time on the difference it makes in the way each generation of students approaches the poem that it is told that the poem’s name is *Beowulf* rather than, say, *Some Deeds of the Northmen* or *Men and Monsters in Early Times*.

Returning specifically to Klaeber’s edition, his glossary has, of course, committed users of his edition to one arbitrary interpretation of the poem, a glossary being nothing more than one person’s translation of a text distributed alphabetically through the last one hundred pages of an edition. For a teaching text a glossary is clearly essential. No novice reader of *Beowulf* would want to sift through all forty-six possible translations of the word *ār*, for example, each time that word occurs in the poem. I would also trust the judgment of Klaeber as much as any scholar’s in making the decisions of selection and exclusion which constitute glossary-making; yet a recent article has argued rather persuasively that several of Klaeber’s definitions appear to have been unduly influenced by late nineteenth-century German preconceptions about the role of women in society.²⁰ One wonders what other hitherto unsuspected preconceptions may have been at work in his glossary-making and whether these should continue to direct and constrain readers’ understanding of the text of *Beowulf* into the twenty-first century.

¹⁶ John Barbour, *The Bruce; or, the History of Robert I, King of Scotland*, ed. John Pinkerton, vol. 1 (London, 1790), p. xii.

¹⁷ Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (ed.), *De Danorum rebus gestis secul. III et IV. Poëma Danicum dialecto Anglosaxonica* (Copenhagen, 1815). In his preface Thorkelin speaks of three Northern peoples (including the English!) ‘qvi vocati uno nomine Dani, omnes ore eodem dialectice solummodo differente loqvebantur’; but elsewhere in the preface he uses *Dani* in the narrow sense, equivalent to *Scyldingas*. See also p. 259, s.v. *Dani*.

¹⁸ Greenfield and Robinson, *A Bibliography of Publications*, items 534, 1636, 278. Turner refers to the text specifically as ‘The Poem on Beowulf’.

¹⁹ John Mitchell Kemble (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf, The Travellers Song, and The Battle of Finnes-burh* (London, 1833).

²⁰ Josephine Bloomfield, ‘Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber’s Rewriting of Wealththeow,’ *JEGP*, 93 (1994), 183–203.

One example of a problematic glossary entry is *āglǣca*, which occurs nineteen times in the poem referring to Grendel or the dragon and three times referring to the heroes Beowulf and Sigemund. (One of the three—in line 1512—is grammatically ambiguous and hence ambiguous in its reference.) Klaeber defines the word primarily as meaning ‘wretch, monster, demon, fiend’ with ad hoc glosses ‘warrior, hero’ to accommodate the references to Beowulf and Sigemund. This has led to extensive and (to my mind) misguided theorising by scholars and critics over the deep implications of the poet’s using a word with the primary meaning ‘monster’ to refer to the hero Beowulf. But Klaeber’s definition of *āglǣca* is probably overdetermined. Since we do not know the etymology of the word, we are hampered in assessing its meaning.²¹ But we do have the noun *āglǣc* of which *āglǣca* seems to be an agent form. *Āglǣc* means ‘trouble, vexation’, and so *āglǣca* would appear to mean ‘troubler, vexer’. That is, it looks like a neutral term meaning one who troubles or vexes another—as a hero might do as easily as a monster. Perhaps ‘assailant’, ‘fierce combatant’, or ‘antagonist’ would be appropriate translations, or we might accept the *Dictionary of Old English* definition: ‘awesome opponent, ferocious fighter’²²—words which are equally applicable to hero and monstrous adversary. *Āglǣca* is very likely a word like *fēond* ‘enemy, foe’, which is also used of both monsters and heroes. Just as it would be a mistake to gloss *fēond* ‘foe’ as ‘monster’ when it refers to Grendel and ‘hero’ when it refers to Beowulf, so is it mistaken to gloss *āglǣca* as Klaeber has, a mistake which has led to all the tiresome discussion of monstrous heroes and heroic monsters.²³

Again, Klaeber’s glossary-rendering of *fāh* as ‘blood-stained’ in seven of the word’s occurrences conceals the grim figuration in the usage ‘adorned (with blood)’ and repeatedly leads students to the unfortunate translation ‘blood-stained with blood’. He also mischaracterises Ongentheow’s wife as elderly by translating *gēomēowle* ‘woman of old, woman of a former day’ as ‘old woman’. A grammatical

²¹ Sherman M. Kuhn’s proposed etymology in ‘Old English *āglǣca*—Middle Irish *oclach*,’ in Irmengard Rausch and Gerald F. Carr (eds.), *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honor of Herbert Penzl* (The Hague, 1979), pp. 213–30, is well argued and attractive but has not received general acceptance.

²² Antonette diPaolo Healey *et al.*, *Dictionary of Old English: A* (Toronto, 1994), s.v. *āglǣca*.

²³ I have dealt with this word in more detail in T. Nevalainen and L. Kahlas-Tarkka (eds.), *To explain the Present: Studies . . . in Honour of Matti Rissanen* (Helsinki, 1997).

misconstrual (as I take it to be) has actually misled him into an unnecessary emendation. The poet says of Thryth in lines 1954–6:

hīold hēahlufan wiE hæleþa brego,
ealles moncynnes mīne gefræge
þone [ms. *þæs*] sēlestan bī sām twēonum . . .

Following his predecessors, Klaeber glosses *brego* in line 1954 as accusative singular. That is, he decides that of the three possible cases that *wiE* can govern—accusative, genitive, and dative—*brego* here is accusative. The decision is arbitrary since *brego* is indeclinable in form,²⁴ and this arbitrary decision then forces Klaeber (following Thorpe’s lead) to emend *þæs sēlestan* to *þone sēlestan* in line 1956. It would seem more logical to assume that the indeclinable *brego* is here functioning as a genitive object of *wiE* and is in agreement with its appositive *þæs sēlestan* in line 1956. The long-standing emendation of *þæs* to *þone* is unnecessary.

In line 2940 appears the verb *gētan* in the passage reporting Ongentheow’s threat to deal severely (once day comes) with the Geatas whom he has cornered in the Battle of Ravenswood. Klaeber, following the dictionaries, glosses *gētan* ‘destroy, kill’ and then, since the meaning makes poor sense in context, he suggests in a note on p. 223 that a scribe has bungled and text has probably been lost. But *gētan*, a causative weak verb formed on the strong verb *gēotan* ‘pour, flow, [bleed]’ means ‘to cause to bleed, let blood’, and the passage in the manuscript makes sense: ‘[Ongentheow] said that in the morning he would with the swords’ blades let the blood of some of them on the gallows tree.’ He is vowing to sacrifice his vanquished enemies to the war god. Reports of Germanic people sacrificing soldiers they have captured are found in Strabo (who describes the neighbouring Cimbri hanging their war prisoners and then piercing them and collecting the blood in a bowl), Jordanes, Tacitus, Procopius, and Orosius, while some of the surviving Scandinavian artefacts seem to attest to the practice in that area.²⁵ Ongentheow’s threat would seem to be one of those

²⁴ Both nominative and accusative singular forms occur as *brego*, *-u*, *-a*, and in *Resignation*, l. 79 *brego* is clearly dative:

Gode ic hæbbe
abolgen, brego moncynnes . . .

Like the similarly indeclinable *fela*, *brego* was originally a *u*-stem, and it is the phonetic instability (virtual interchangeability) of the *u*-stem singular endings *-a*, *-o*, *-u* that led to these words becoming indeclinables.

²⁵ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 54–6 lists the relevant sources.

moments in the poem when the poet allows himself to characterise his heathen subjects as frankly heathen—as in his accounts of cremations, ship-burials, and of pagan Danes worshipping idols. These deft allusions to characters' behaviour in the dark, pre-Christian past are an important element in the poet's representation of his subject and should not be obscured by misleading commentary and glossing.

Another crux in *Beowulf* where Klaeber (amongst others) has suspected loss of text unnecessarily is the beginning of the so-called digression on Thryth and Offa, lines 1931–2. The full context (lines 1925–32) according to Klaeber's edition is as follows:

Bold wæs bētlīc, bregorōf cyning
 hēa[h on] healle, Hygd swīEe geong,
 wīs welþungen, þēah Ee wintra lýt
 under burhlocan gebiden hægbe,
 Hæreþes dohtor; næs hīo hnāh swā þēah,
 nē tō gnēaE gifa Gēata lēodum,
 māþmgestrēona. MōðþrýEo wæg,
 fremu folces cwēn, firen' ondrysne . . .

A literal translation of Klaeber's text will reveal the difficulty:

The building [i.e. Hygelac's hall] was grand, the famous king [was] exalted in his hall. Hygd, the daughter of Hæreth, [was] very young, wise, and accomplished, although she had lived but few years in the castle. Yet she was not illiberal or too sparing of gifts, of treasures, to the people of the Geatas. Modthryth, an excellent queen of her people, carried on terrible crime . . .

and we are told of the awful things that Modthryth did early in her reign before her husband took her in hand. The problems are twofold: first, the impossibly abrupt transition from Hygd to Modthryth, or rather the total absence of any transition, this being the reason editors have assumed loss of text here; secondly, there is the absurdity of introducing the unspeakably vicious Modthryth as *fremu folces cwēn* 'excellent queen of her people'. Besides this there is the uncertainty over Modthryth's name: the analogues give us as much reason to assume that her name is Thryth as Modthryth, and if we take the name as Thryth, then we are left with *mōd* as the common noun meaning 'pride, boldness, arrogance', and we must decide what to do with it.

A quite satisfactory solution to this crux was proposed—or rather implied—in 1941 by Kemp Malone. In an article focused primarily on other matters Malone edits and translates the passage as follows:

Bold wæs betlic, bregorof cyning,
 hēa, healle, Hygd swīEe geong,
 wis, welþungen. Ðeah Ee wintra lýt
 under burhlocan gebiden hæbbe,
 Hæreþes dohtor, næs hio hnah swa þeah,
 ne to gneaE gifa Geata leodum,
 maþmgestreona: mod þryEo wæg,
 fremu folces cwen, firen ondrysne.

The building was grand, the king renowned, high, the hall even so, Hygd very young, wise, virtuous. Though she may have spent only a few years at court, the daughter of Hæreth, nevertheless she was not ungenerous, nor too sparing of gifts and treasure to the men of the Geatas: the good folk-queen had weighed the arrogance and terrible wickedness of Thryth.²⁶

By taking *wæg* (line 1931) ‘weighed’ in the common figurative sense ‘considered, weighed the merits of’, Malone provides a logical circumstance for the introduction of Thryth: Hygd was well-behaved because she had given thought to the unbecoming conduct (*mod*) of Thryth and evidently resolved not to follow her example. By taking *fremu folces cwen* as referring to Hygd rather than Thryth Malone effectively disposes of the problem Klaeber created in assigning the phrase to Thryth.

In a comment in the final supplement to his edition²⁷ Klaeber takes note of Malone’s translation, but only to dismiss it. Acknowledging that Malone’s rendering successfully removes ‘the harshness of transition from Hygd to Thryth’, Klaeber nonetheless doubts that Old English *wegan* ‘weigh, measure, bear’ could be used metaphorically to mean ‘consider, weigh the merits of’, and Klaeber adds that ‘the whole idea’ of a queen considering the negative example of a precursor in fashioning her own behaviour ‘strikes one as altogether too modern’.

But the metaphor by which a word meaning ‘weigh’ comes to mean ‘consider, think about, weigh the merits of’ is something approaching a linguistic universal. Latin *ponderare* and *pensare* both meant ‘weigh’ originally but come to mean ‘think, ponder’ as well. The Old English borrowing from Latin *pensare*, *pinsian*, shows the same duality, with the verb (*ā*)*pinsian* usually meaning ‘to weigh in the mind, consider’ while the noun form *āpinsung* retains the original, literal sense ‘weighing scales, balance’. *Deliberare*, formed on the root *libra* ‘scales’

²⁶ ‘Hygd’, *Modern Language Notes*, 56 (1941), 356–8 at 356.

²⁷ p. 468.

similarly comes to mean ‘deliberate, weigh the pros and cons’. German *wägen* (a direct cognate of Old English *wegan*) and *erwägen* can mean ‘ponder, consider’, and Old High German *wegan* already evinces such a metaphorical sense,²⁸ as does Old Norse *vega*.²⁹ For an example outside of Indo-European we might consider Finnish *punnita*, which is used to mean ‘weigh’ (as in weighing vegetables, meat, or people) but which also means ‘consider, ponder’ as in *Tätä täytyy punnita tarkasti* ‘we must give careful consideration to this’.³⁰ And so, acknowledging the prior likelihood of a metaphorical sense in *wæg*, and noting the evidence for it in other early Germanic languages and beyond, we might well accept Malone’s suggested reading and substitute it for the troubled, unsatisfactory presentation of the passage in Klaeber’s text. Klaeber’s objection that Malone’s interpretation is ‘altogether too modern’ is odd. In *Beowulf* lines 898–915 and 1709–24 Hrothgar urges Beowulf to heed and avoid the negative example of Heremod in fashioning his own conduct. What could be more in keeping with the poem’s mores than having Hygd heed and avoid the negative example of Thryth in shaping her own conduct? The often noted onomastic play by which Hygd, whose name means ‘thought, reflection’ rejects the behaviour of Thryth, whose name means ‘force, physical power’ underscores nicely the contrast the poet is pointing here.

In one surprising instance Klaeber, his precursors, and editors after them have perpetrated and perpetuated a faulty verse by ignoring evidence in the very manuscript itself. Lines 746–8 describe Grendel’s attack on Beowulf as follows:

nam þā mid handa higeþhtigne
 rinc on ræste, ræhte ongēan
 fēond mid folme . . .

²⁸ Rudolf Schützeichel, *Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch* (Tübingen, 3rd edn., 1981), s.v. *wegan* cites in addition to the literal senses *wiegen* and *wägen* the extended senses *abwägen*, *einschätzen*, *bestimmen*, *festsetzen*.

²⁹ See the metaphorical senses illustrated in Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, with a supplement by Sir William Craigie (Oxford, 2nd edn., 1957), s.v. *vega* III. I should mention that long before Klaeber rejected the reading I am recommending here, L. L. Schücking (ed.), *Beowulf* (Paderborn, 1910), who emended l. 1931b to ‘mōd þrȳEe ne-wæg’, took *cwēn* in line 1932 as a nominative referring to Hygd and interpreted *wæg* as having something like the sense I am suggesting for it here.

³⁰ Professor Merja Kytö of Uppsala University kindly supplied me with this example. Japanese friends, moreover, tell me that the Japanese word *hakaru* ‘weigh, measure’ is also used in the extended sense ‘judge, consider’.

The failure of sense will be apparent from my translation: ‘He [Grendel] seized with his hand the stout-hearted warrior in his resting-place; the opponent with his hand reached towards . . .’. Towards what or whom? The preposition *ongēan* has no object. Instead of *ræhte ongēan* we would expect the half-line to be *him ræhte ongēan* ‘he reached towards him’. Compare *him gangaE ongean* in the *Paris Psalter* 84, 9:1 and *þe him foran ongēan* in *Beowulf* 2364. A second problem with the half-line *ræhte ongēan* is that, lacking an unaccented syllable before *ræhte*, it is metrically short. For some years before Klaeber’s edition, editors tried to remedy the metrical deficiency by emending *ongēan* to *tōgēanes*, but this leaves the problem of the missing object unaddressed, and so Klaeber returned to the manuscript reading *ræhte ongēan*, deciding, apparently, to leave bad enough alone.

But is *ræhte ongēan* the manuscript reading? When we look at the manuscript page, we find that there, just before the word *ræhte* is a space with the remnants of several erased or partially erased letters. The first of these letters is pretty clearly *h*, the very letter we are looking for if we want to read the half-line as *him ræhte ongēan*. Since the actual manuscript reading is *h . . . ræhte ongēan*, I suggest that an editor should supply for his text the metrically perfect line *him ræhte ongēan*, explaining that the *-im* of *him* is a conjecture based on illegible letters in the manuscript.

After I reached this conclusion, I discovered that John C. Pope in *The Rhythm of Beowulf* had anticipated me in calling attention to the remnant of letters before *ræhte*, proposing the reconstruction *him swā ræhte ongēan*.³¹ But in the revised edition of his book Pope says, ‘Klaeber (Second Supplement, p. 466) objected that *him swā ræhte ongēan* “hardly makes acceptable sense,” and of course if this is so, the suggestion must be abandoned’.³²

What makes Pope’s reading problematic is the awkward *swā* in *him swā ræhte ongēan*. Apparently Pope thought it was necessary to have *him swā* because in the manuscript the erasure has room for five or six letters, not just three, and Pope assumed that any reconstruction must fill up the amount of space in the manuscript. But this assumption is fallacious. Whatever the scribe was removing when he erased the letters was presumably wrong. Otherwise, why would he have erased it? Therefore a reconstruction of the intended word need not fill the space

³¹ *The Rhythm of Beowulf* (New Haven, 1942), p. 237.

³² Pope, *Rhythm* (New Haven, rev. edn., 1966), p. xxxi.

left by the erased incorrect letters. Conjecturally, we may reconstruct the process of error. The erasure consists of a partially erased *h* followed by a letter which Zupitza thought had probably been an *a* before it was erased.³³ Now above and to the right of the erasure in the preceding line of the manuscript are the letters *han*, the first syllable of *handa*, which is completed in the next line. Apparently, when the scribe went to write *him*, his eye was caught by the neighbouring word *handa* in his exemplar, and he copied that. Then noticing his mistake, he erased *handa*, all except for the initial *h*, which he intended to complete as *him*. But he neglected to complete the correction. We can with considerable confidence complete his correction for him, being guided by syntax, sense, metre, and by the vestigial evidence in the manuscript. But the first step in making the correction is to free ourselves from the seeming authority of Klaeber both when he initially edited the passage without considering the manuscript evidence and when he summarily rejects Pope's attempt to improve on his reading.³⁴

In other places as well Klaeber has given authority and longevity to readings which do not agree with the evidence of the manuscript. His reading *ābrocene* at line 2064 provides a minor example. All that is left intact in the manuscript today is *ocene*, but Thorkelin A and B agree on *orocene*. The word began originally with *b-*, as the alliterative pattern confirms, and evidently the ascender was missing when the transcripts were made and so the bowl of the *b* was mistaken for *o*. There was originally space before the *b-* in the manuscript, and Klaeber, following Kemble, inserts the prefix *ā-*, but this will not fill the space that was there. Better is *gebrocene*, a verb and a past participle which is attested elsewhere in *Beowulf*, as *ābrocen* is not.

A remarkable indifference to the evidence of the manuscript may be seen in Klaeber's emendation *lǣndaga* in line 2341:

. . . lind wiE līge. Sceolde lǣndaga
 æpeling ærgōd ende gebīdan,
 worulde līfes . . .

³³ Julius Zupitza (ed.), *Beowulf Reproduced in Facsimile*, Early English Text Society os 245 (Oxford, 2nd edn. 1959), p. 36.

³⁴ The reading *him rǣhte ongēan* is so completely suitable that, not suprisingly, it has been proposed before as an outright emendation (Moritz Trautmann (ed.), *Das Beowulfied* (Bonn, 1904)) and as a restoration (Michael Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf* (Manchester, 1978)). Neither of these editors discusses the manuscript evidence.

Sceolde appears now at the charred edge of the vellum leaf, and the text format indicates that there was room for two or three letters after *sceolde*, and the first of these letters would have to have been *l-* in order to make the alliteration with *lind* and *līge* in the on-verse. The syllable *pend* at the beginning of the next line of text looks like *p* followed by a present participial ending, and then *daga*. Klaeber ignores all this evidence and, following his precursors, simply substitutes *læn* for *pend* without even trying to suggest how such an error might have come about. Malone,³⁵ again, had a much better suggestion. He leaves the clear reading *pend* intact and suggests that *lī* is the syllable which originally followed *Sceolde*. This would make a compound *līpenddaga*, and a half-line that is type b alliterating properly with the preceding half-line. Malone's *līpenddaga* has the same morphological make-up as the documented compound *swæsenddagas* and could mean either 'fleeting days' or 'seafaring days'. Adopting Malone's suggestion, I would translate the resulting passage: 'The atheling good of old must experience the end of his fleeting days, of life in this world'.³⁶ This seems to me to make good sense, and unlike Klaeber's text, does not defy the evidence of the manuscript.

A final example of Klaeber's doing his editing at too far a remove from the manuscript is his emendation *læded* in the passage near the end of the poem which says that it is proper for retainers to praise their king 'when he must be led forth from his body' (lines 3174–5):

þonne hē forE scile
of līchaman (læded) weorEan.

Klaeber's word *læded* 'led' (supplied where the manuscript is illegible) makes excellent sense, and it has the support of two documentations of the words *of līchaman læded wære* in the poem *Soul and Body*.³⁷ The problem is that there is not space in the manuscript for *læded*. Probably what the scribe wrote was the contracted form of the past participle *læd*, for which there is ample space. We need to recall that this passage

³⁵ Kemp Malone (ed.), *The Nowell Codex*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, vol. 12 (Copenhagen, 1963), p. 89.

³⁶ Malone takes *līpend* in the sense 'seafarer', which he describes as 'a good epithet for Beowulf'. I suppose *līpenddaga* could be translated as 'days as a seafarer', but I think 'transient days', 'fleeting days' gives better sense.

³⁷ At l. 21 both Vercelli and Exeter versions of the poem record the phrase. See also *sawla lædan* in *Christ and Satan* 398 and *gregorius . . . to þam ecan setle þæs heofonlican rices læded wæs* in Thomas Miller (ed.), *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, Early English Text Society os 95 (London, 1890), p. 94.

occurs in the closing lines of the manuscript where the scribe was abbreviating extensively so that he could finish the poem without running over onto a new leaf. He would naturally have chosen the brief form of the past participle, even though the poet no doubt intended the full form *læded*, which is needed for the metre. Which form to put in the text is a nice question for the editor, but whichever one chooses, some paleographical commentary is necessary.

There are many more places where long-accepted textual decisions by Klaeber need to be rethought, but I forbear to continue with a form of textual criticism which makes tedious listening if pursued excessively. I turn instead for the remainder of my remarks to two brief points about Klaeber's commentary by way of suggesting that here too there is room for fresh consideration of matters long left as they stand in Klaeber.

Early in his career Klaeber published a four-part article called 'Die christlichen Elemente im *Beowulf*'³⁸ in which he itemised every passage in the poem for which he could recall a biblical analogue. A commendable reaction against the *Deuschtümelei* of many German scholars before him, his article did much to right the balance between Christian and pagan emphases in the reading of *Beowulf* and helped students of the poem to see it as a whole rather than a patchwork.³⁹ When in later years his edition appeared, the commentary in the edition seems to have become a repository for all the biblical parallels which Klaeber had conceived in his article, and the resulting plethora of biblical analogues has had the effect in some quarters of encouraging scholars to assert an exclusively Christian *Beowulf* (often accompanied by strenuous allegorising) and to deny altogether the secular, pre-Christian element in the poem. Let one example serve for many. After *Beowulf*'s triumph over Grendel, King Hrothgar extols the hero in the following terms (lines 942–6):

Hwæt, þæt secgan mæg
 efne swā hwylc mægþa swā Eone magan cende
 æfter gumcynnum, gyf hēo gýt lyfaE,
 þæt hyre Ealdmetod ēste wære
 bearngebyrdo.

³⁸ *Anglia*, 35 (1911–12), 111–36, 249–70, 453–82; 36 (1912), 169–99.

³⁹ The context in which Klaeber's article appeared is clarified by Eric Gerald Stanley in *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 48–50.

Saying that the mother who gave birth to this hero was blessed would seem to be a commonplace of heroic literature, and indeed a variant of it appears later when Hrothgar again praises Beowulf in lines 1700–3. Bugge, moreover, long ago called attention to Scandinavian ballads in which a similar compliment is paid to heroes after they have accomplished daring deeds.⁴⁰ But according to the note in Klaeber's edition (which is based on his earlier article), the first of the two passages in *Beowulf* is a biblical reference, an allusion to Luke 11:27, where a woman in a crowd which had been listening to Jesus respond to some accusing critics cries out, 'Blessed is the womb which bore thee and the breasts that nursed thee!' And so with this note Beowulf becomes a Christ figure and Hrothgar a quoter of Scripture.

A compliment of this kind would seem to be so commonplace⁴¹ that it would seem inadvisable for an editor to declare it a 'biblical reminiscence' (while dismissing any other occurrences of the motif in literature as 'of no importance'). Where loose parallels with Scripture do occur in speeches of the pre-Christian characters in the poem, they are, as I have argued elsewhere, probably to be taken not as explicit allusions or reminiscences but as subtle suggestions by the poet that there is 'a kind of natural, universal wisdom that any noble heathen might share with a Christian'⁴² and that the poet's introduction of these points of convergence would lend dignity to his heroic heathen characters without denying their heathen status.

My example of this dubious scriptural allusion is by way of suggesting that Klaeber's notes would at times be better if they supplied less. The opposite is also the case. One instance where more information would be helpful is at lines 1855–8, where Hrothgar says to Beowulf:

Hafast þū gefēred, þæt þām folcum sceal,
 Gēata lēodum ond Gār-Denum
 sib gemæne, ond sacu restan,
 inwitnīpas, þē hīe ær drugon . . .

⁴⁰ Cited by Klaeber, p. xvii, n. 3, but dismissed by him as a 'coincidence' which 'need not be considered of importance'.

⁴¹ Many years ago when I was in the American Army, stationed near the Mexican border, I used to visit towns such as Juarez from time to time. There I would see young Mexican men lounging on the street corners who would occasionally whistle at a pretty girl passing by and shout at her, '¡Dichosa la madre que té parió!', that is: 'Lucky the mother who gave birth to you!'. Only years later when I was reading Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf* did I realise that those young men were alluding to Luke 11:27.

⁴² Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, 1985), p. 33.

You have brought it about that peace shall prevail
 between the nations of the Geatas and the Danes,
 and the strife and hostilities
 that they formerly experienced shall cease . . .

So far as I am aware no one has explained—or even asked—what the former hostilities between Geatas and Danes were. But in Saxo Grammaticus we are told that the son of the Danish King Skjoldus—the Scyld Scefing of *Beowulf*—waged wars against the folk in Geatland (*Gothia*), killing their leader Suarinus and his brothers.⁴³ This would seem to be worth mentioning in a note since it may suggest that there was lore about earlier hostilities between Danes and Geatas, and this lore would complete the sense of Hrothgar's otherwise puzzling reference. That a specific altercation between Danes and Geatas may have been in the poet's mind here might also lead us to reconsider Klaeber's emendation in the ensuing line 1862, where he changes *ofer heapu* 'after the war' to *ofer heafu* 'across the ocean'.⁴⁴ Once again, Klaeber's text as well as his commentary seems in need of fresh scrutiny.

It is no disparagement of Friedrich Klaeber's monumental achievement to suggest that now it may be time to move on from the long hegemony of his edition. In the half-century since his last supplement appeared, Old English scholars have placed at our disposal much that would be of inestimable value to an editor of a new and comprehensive edition of *Beowulf*, and the next few years are going to see yet more. Nearly fifty years of sustained textual criticism of the poem have suggested many options which could not have occurred to Klaeber when he was meditating over the poem's textual puzzles. *The Dictionary of Old English* project in Toronto will soon provide (already indeed, provides in part) an informed analysis of the vocabulary of Old English which would have been a godsend to Klaeber, as would the exhaustive

⁴³ C. Knabe, P. Herrmann, J. Olrik, and H. Raeder (eds.), *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 18: 'Occiso Suetiæ rege Sigtrugo, Gram quæsitum armis imperium possessione firmare cupiens Suarinum Gothiæ præfectum ob affectati regni suspicionem in pugna certamen devotatum oppressit fratresque eius septem matrimonio, novem pelice procreatos impari dimicationis genere fraternæ necis ultionem petentes absumpsit'. The name Gram for Scyld's son is probably the common epithet for 'prince' misunderstood or substituted deliberately for the son's actual name. See Paul Hermann, *Die Heldensagen des Saxo Grammaticus: Erläuterungen zu den ersten neuen Büchern der dänischen Geschichte des Saxo Grammaticus*, 2. Teil (Leipzig, 1922), p. 78.

⁴⁴ It is true that *heapu* elsewhere occurs only as a compound element, not as a simplex. But the fact that *heoru* 'sword' occurs only as a compound element everywhere except at l. 1285, where it is a simplex, does not prevent Klaeber and other editors from acknowledging the simplex in l. 1285 and printing it in the text.

microfiche concordance on which the Toronto dictionary is founded. Jane Roberts and Christian Kay's *Thesaurus of Old English*⁴⁵ would give a modern editor an enormous advantage over Klaeber. The manuscript (study of which seems to have been a weak point in Klaeber's editorial methodology) has been analysed closely with technology not even envisioned in Klaeber's day, and British Museum Publications together with the University of Michigan Press will make available in summer 1997 Kevin Kiernan's compact disk version of the *Beowulf* manuscript which will make it possible to read text behind the paper frames of the charred pages with the benefit of digitised images read over fibre-optic light. This should provide the clearest possible view of all that survives in the manuscript, while James R. Hall's exhaustive analysis and collation of the early transcripts and early collations of the manuscript by scholars like Thorkelin, Conybeare, Grundtvig, Kemble, Madden, and Thorpe will assure that we shall not lose one jot of the surviving testimony to the manuscript's contents before it reached its present state of arrested decay. Bruce Mitchell's magisterial *Old English Syntax*⁴⁶ will be as valuable to a new editor of *Beowulf* as it is to other Old English scholars, and his particular guidance on the punctuation of Old English poetry will provide a remedy for one aspect of Klaeber's edition which has always been a source of dissatisfaction. I am even optimistic enough to think that out of the welter of uneven literary criticism of *Beowulf* since 1950 we have acquired some wisdom in judging matters of fact and interpretation which Klaeber did not have. It is in the light of these end-of-the-century realities that I have offered my points today suggesting that Klaeber's text is in need of supersession and that insofar as there is a 'Klaeber consensus' constraining our study and textual criticism of the poem, this is a matter for some concern.

Beowulf in the twentieth century has indeed been Klaeber's *Beowulf*, and his text has served our century well. My purpose in these remarks has been to suggest that Klaeber should *not* be *Beowulf* in the twenty-first century as well.

⁴⁵ King's College London Medieval Studies 9 (London, 1995), 2 vols.

⁴⁶ Oxford, 1985, 2 vols.