

A POLYVOCAL EPIC AND EDITORIAL POLICY

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WHAT YOU HOLD in your hand (or read on your screen) is a very medieval enterprise. Medieval texts were not stable entities. They existed in numerous variations, often copied by different 'hands' (scribes) who introduced their own spellings, syntax, and abbreviations into their copying. What is often taken to be an invention of post-modern literature was the bread and butter of medieval authors: no two copies of a text were alike.

As readers of medieval texts, many of us grew up in the 'critical edition' tradition, which relegated those variants of manuscript instantiations into enormous footnotes, creating in them an almost *Finnegans Wake*-like narrative of departures, alternatives, substitutes. This quest to create a 'true' text, an artificial phantom only achievable by distilling a different reception into a single concoction, was seen as necessary by the nineteenth-century editors. What they wanted was certainty, and what they got was univocality with a background whisper. Scholars read those footnotes and hear the choir in the distance. But when texts get translated, decisions have to be made, and a single thread has to be followed. There are a great many reasons why this practice is necessary, and without the work of critical editors many of those unstable medieval texts would be, if not untranslatable, then at least very difficult to comprehend. At the same time, even though the critical edition is the foundation of both medieval literary and historical studies, it creates an impression of a monolithic text that has, in fact, seldom existed.

The case of *Beowulf* is, in respect to its instability, special. The whole text of the poem exists in the unique version in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv. On the face of it, there should be no textual variations to speak of, no choir to relegate into a critical footnote. But on closer inspection we see that there are two scribes; that the heroines and heroes of the poem appear in other texts, not only in Old English but also in Old Norse, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; that the places mentioned in the alliterative verses can also be found in the geographies of many different traditions; that various words and names can be read differently and those various readings do not always have to have a hierarchy to them. This polyvocality is somewhat obscured to us in the material sense when we read *Beowulf*, for we have only one manuscript transmission of the text. But even in this one manuscript, the subtle scribal differences between the two hands offer a glimpse of (scribal) polyphony. Thus, *Beowulf* is also a polyvocal poem at its heart.

This polyvocal *Beowulf* is, when we look at its impact, very much a part of nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century literature as well. Among the reasons why the poem became first a modernist and then a post-modernist phenomenon, one stands out: translation. There are over 350 translations of *Beowulf* in existence. For a text preserved in a single manuscript, written in a dead language, on an island off the coast of Europe, this is a remarkable number. The poem inspired comic books, music pieces,

and films. The practice of its translation has produced one of the great epic poems of the twentieth century—Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*. This is a very venerable tradition to which to contribute; and if there is an Old English text truly *for All*, it is *Beowulf*. The poem has become a part of quotidian life, and not only in the English-speaking world.

In trying to edit this remarkable endeavour that lies before you in this volume, the editors attempted to connect to all the characteristics of the poem's text: to the medieval roots of its form, but also to the very modern and postmodern reception of its text. *Beowulf for All* is, therefore, first and foremost an exercise in hearing. Hearing the polyvocality of the text itself, with its different traditions and registers; but also hearing the variety of voices that already are and that *can* be present in its tradition. As editors, we have tried to preserve the crucial polyvocality of this translation. We have limited our interventions, abstained from enforcing consistency. Most importantly, we have tried not to build a singular register for this translation. In that respect, the text resembles a *Sammelhandschrift*—a manuscript gathered together from different fragments or works. Through this, *Beowulf for All* resembles the unstable nature of medieval literature, including in its variant readings of personal names, mixtures of genres, and interpretations.

Thus, the readers will encounter Higelac and Hygelac, Scydlings and Shieldings on the pages of this *Beowulf*. In that respect it is not a 'critical edition' translation. More so, the variant spellings actually enrich the experience. Just as the heroines and heroes of *Beowulf* existed in multiple environments, so they exist here in their inconsistent versions. The text presents also many forms of modern English, many registers, and a variable orthography.

Editorial decisions have, of course, been made; this is a translation preserving the structural integrity of the poem. Nevertheless, it remains polyvocal and, perhaps, thus closer to how the copyists of *Beowulf* would have known it. Epics tend not to speak in one voice.

An exercise in engagement becomes in this translation also an exercise in understanding. *Beowulf for All* will not replace other translations of the poem; this was never its goal. But it offers a chance to see a different *Beowulf*: a diverse one, simultaneously modern while also very medieval.