

Essays in Medieval Studies

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

page 13**Codicological Consideration in the *Beowulf* Manuscript****Richard W. Clement**

A recent book by Professor Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick, 1981), has caused a great deal of discussion in the field of *Beowulf* studies. Professor Kiernan has moved the date of composition for the poem to the reign of King Canute in the early eleventh century. He believes that our unique manuscript, the Nowell Codex, or really just the *Beowulf* portion, is the poet's own working copy. His startling conclusions are based on a complex codicological and paleographical analysis. We must remember that as a result of the fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, the codex no longer has any trace of its binding or even of conjugation the Nowell Codex is a stack of disjunct leaves. Hence the collation of Cotton, Vitellius, A.XV, ff. 94-209 is not the simple and straightforward process normally associated with such procedures, but rather it demands the consideration of a whole range of codicological factors. The collation is exceptionally important to Professor Kiernan's thesis, as his conclusions are ultimately based on the requirement of a separate or discrete *Beowulf*: that is, that *Beowulf* begins a new gathering or quire, and that the *Judith* fragment which follows *Beowulf* was not originally part of the codex.

The collation is not self-evident by any means. Förster, Dobbie, Ker, Malone, Boyle, and Kiernan have all come to differing conclusions.¹ (We may, however, take Malone's collation, from his facsimile, to represent the traditionally accepted collation.)

page 14

Kiernan's study of the physical make up of the manuscript is the most far-reaching and detailed, yet, as he admits "this study of the *Beowulf* MS is not totally objective, for it is founded on the premise of a contemporary MS"² It is unfortunate that Kiernan's admitted subjectivity has led him to overlook evidence that makes his collation (or indeed any but Malone's) highly unlikely.

Kiernan's collation is the only one which has considered the hair-flesh sequences in the entire codex. In essence, his collation best explains many of the remaining physical aspects of the codex, yet Kiernan's codicological conclusions based upon his collation are highly conjectural. The diagrams at the end of this essay set out the hair-flesh sequences of the Nowell Codex following the official foliation of the British Library. The hair-flesh sequences clearly establish the larger structure of all the gatherings except quires 5 and 6. Quire 1 is a gathering of ten folios, all with the hair sides out. This first quire of the codex, the first quire of Scribe A's portion, has a make up which is identical to quire 12, the first quire of Scribe B's *Beowulf* portion. Quire 2 is made up of six folios: the hair-flesh sequence illustrates that no other configuration is possible. In this quire, however, the normal alternation of hair opposite hair, the flesh opposite flesh has not been maintained in the outer sheet. Here, where we might expect the flesh side to face outward if the alternation were maintained, the hair side faces outward, but of course this is not at all unusual, as it was customary in an outer sheet of a gathering that the hair side face outward to protect the quire. Indeed, this is true for all fourteen quires of the Nowell Codex. Quire 2, however, is actually an original gathering of four sheets: the outer sheet has been removed and the next sheet (now the outer sheet) reversed so that the hair side faces out. Conversely only the second sheet {nay have been removed; the result would be

page 15

identical. Normal gatherings of four sheets which exhibit the standard regular alternation of hair and flesh sides always have the hair side of the inner sheet inside and thus the hair side of the outer sheet outside. Conversely, a three sheet quire has the flesh side of the inner sheet inside and, thus, the hair side of the outer sheet outside. It is therefore clear that quire 2 was originally a four-sheet gathering.

It has long been recognized that ff. 110-117 and 118-125 must make up two discrete gatherings. The manuscript foliation, and of course the text, reflects the transposition of the two gatherings by an early modern binder, and the hair-flesh sequences illustrate that ff. 110-117 and 118-125 do indeed constitute quire 3 (which is actually 4) and 4 (which is actually 3). As Kiernan has pointed out, both of these gatherings consist of three sheets augmented by a pair

of singletons (ff. 3 and 6). If we remove the pair of singletons the two gatherings make perfectly regular gatherings of three sheets, or six folios, and as further corroboration, the inner sheets of both quires are positioned flesh side inwards, as is standard in three-sheet quires. Unfortunately, the hair-flesh sequences fail us in quires 5 and 6. There are two, or even three possible configurations, but I will return to these in more detail below.

Quire 7 is seemingly a normal gathering of eight folios, except that folio 6 (f. 147) cannot possibly be conjugate with folio 3 (f. 144); folio 3 is hair side out, while folio 6 is flesh side out. Kiernan suggested that folio 6 must be a replacement leaf and this does indeed seem possible.

Quire 8 is also seemingly a normal gathering of eight folios. Although each of the four pairs of folios appears to be conjugate, the hair-flesh sequence is irregular. The quire was originally made up of three sheets (the inner sheet has the flesh side inwards),

page 16

and then either an outer sheet was added (conjugate folios 1 and 8) or an extra sheet (conjugate folios 2 and 7) was inserted. Both of these sheets have the hair side facing out; the removal of either restores the normal hair-flesh sequence. There is also the possibility that folios 2 and 7 are each singletons, but this is impossible to determine. In any case, quire 8 was originally a quire of three sheets which was augmented by one or more sheets or perhaps two singletons.

Quire 9 is a perfectly normal gathering of four sheets, or eight folios, which maintains a regular hair-flesh sequence. Quire 10, on the other hand, exhibits an irregularity in its hair-flesh sequence: one sheet (or possibly two singletons) made up either of folios 2 and 7 or of folios 3 and 6 has been inserted into what was originally a gathering of three sheets (again, the inner sheet has the flesh side inwards). If we remove this sheet, the quire is restored to its original regularity. Quire 11 is identical to quire 10.

As mentioned before, quires 12 and 13 are identical in make up to quire 1. They are quires of five sheets or ten folios, all with the hair sides out. Quire 12 was the first full quire of Scribe B's *Beowulf* portion. Quire 14, which comprises the fragmentary *Judith*, is a gathering of four sheets or eight folios, all with the hair sides out. As the text of folio 202r begins in mid-passage, several quires, probably comprising twenty-four folios, are missing between quires 13 and 14. The text ended imperfectly on folio 209v, but someone in an early modern imitation Anglo-Saxon minuscule hand has supplied the end of the poem from a now-lost leaf. Dobbie believed that there was only a single leaf attached to the end of quire 14,³ but, although possible, this seems most unlikely: single leaves were rarely attached at the end of a gathering. Kiernan suggested that another work followed which was detached for

page 17

some reason, but that someone had completed the poem from the few lines on the first folio of the detached work.⁴ It seems more likely, however, that quire 14 was originally made up of five sheets, like quires 1, 12, and 13 and that the outer sheet had become detached and perhaps the two conjugate folios separated. The final folio may have been in such a worn condition that the few remaining lines of *Judith* were copied onto f. 209v, and the final folio was lost or discarded. Admittedly this is conjectural, but it does explain the anomaly of Dobbie's single leaf attached to quire 14.

The arrangement of the hair and flesh sides in ff. 126-141, quires 5 and 6, is ambiguous. There are three possible collations. (See the diagrams at the end of the essay.) The traditional collation divides these sixteen folios into two quires of eight; thus *Beowulf* begins on the seventh folio recto of quire 5. In this scheme, quire 5 is a perfectly normal four-sheet gathering. Quire 6 is an original three-sheet gathering which has been expanded by the insertion of two singletons (ff. 3 and 6).

Kiernan, on the other hand, has suggested an alternative collation. His collation divides these sixteen folios into two quires, the first of six, the second of ten; thus *Beowulf* begins on the first folio of quire 5. In this scheme, quire 5 is a normal gathering of three sheets. Quire 6 is an original gathering of four sheets which has been expanded to ten folios by the addition of folios 4 and 7. Kiernan's quire 6, although possible, is highly unlikely. As we have seen, the codicological practice of the scriptorium which produced the Nowell Codex is varied, but there is no precedent for an expanded quire of four sheets. The physical structures of the quires are of three types: first, an original gathering of three sheets, which in every instance has been expanded to a gathering of eight folios by the

addition of two singletons or an extra sheet (quires 3, 4, 8, 10, 11); second, an original gathering of four sheets (quires 7 and 9; quire 2 has been reduced from four by the removal of one sheet) quire 14, a gathering of four sheets, is unusual in that all the hair sides face outward, but it may well have originally been a five-sheet quire; third, an original gathering of five sheets, all with the hair sides facing outward (quires 1, 12, and 13). Kiernan's quire 5, although unique in that it is not augmented to form a quire of eight folios, is at least an original gathering of three sheets. However, his quire 6, an augmented gathering of five sheets, is totally foreign to the established codicological custom of this scriptorium.

On the other hand, quires 5 and 6 of the traditional collation fit this established custom very well. Quire 5 is a normal gathering of four sheets. Quire 6 is an original three-sheet gathering which has been augmented by the addition of two singletons. This alteration of three-sheet gatherings into eight-folio gatherings is certainly one of the most striking idiosyncratic codicological aspects of the codex.

Kiernan has not been unaware of the problems with his anomalous ten-folio quire 6. At a recent seminar devoted to his work, he suggested another possible collation.⁵ He has coped with the problem of his anomalous quire 6 by converting it into an original three-sheet gathering expanded to an eight-folio gathering by the addition of two singletons, but he has created a far greater anomaly in the bifolium which he has placed between quires 5 and 6. This is an even greater departure from the scriptorial practice reflected in the other quires of the Nowell Codex. Needless to say, it is highly unlikely that this collation represents the actual construction.

Kiernan's two collations, as unlikely as they are, cannot be totally excluded by incontrovertible physical evidence. Indeed he has brought to bear several points which he claims bolster his collation. These are inspired by his desire to see *Beowulf* from the three prose works (*Christopher*, *Marvels of the East*, and *Alexander's Letter*) on the one hand, and *Judith* on the other. I shall consider each one of these in some detail.

Humphrey Wanley in his great *Catalogus* described *Beowulf* in the terms "+In hoc libro+" Kiernan states that there "does not seem to have been any doubt in Wanley's mind that *Beowulf* began a new codex."⁶ However, surely this is not at all what Wanley meant. For instance, Wanley describes Junius 11, the Caedmon MS, as two *libri* and the Exeter Book as ten *libri*. As Wanley did not mean to suggest that either Junius 11 or the Exeter Book was made up of several discrete codices, neither did he mean to suggest that *Beowulf* formed a discrete codex.

Kiernan has noted that "Vi[tellius] A 15" appears at the bottom of folio 132r, the first page of *Beowulf*. He suggests that this signature "was written on the first page of *Beowulf* as instructions to Cotton's binder to include the poem in the composite codex."⁷ One must, however, query the date of this inscription. If this shelf mark was written as a guide to Cotton's binder, why are there no other similar inscriptions on the first folios of other discrete codices? We have several examples of Cotton's notes to his binder, but these are of some length and never (to the best of my knowledge) mention a shelf mark.⁸ The letters are certainly not in Cotton's hand. We have no idea when the codices which presently make up Vitellius A.XV were brought together, but if, for instance, they were bound by Burghley's binder

which is quite possible then the inscription of the Cottonian shelfmark, "Vi[tellius] A 15," would be meaningless as a guide to the binder. It is much more probable that the inscription dates from after the fire at Ashburnham House, when it would have been of some use in keeping the various parts of Vitellius A.XV together. Perhaps *Beowulf* was separated from the "codex" a pile of disjunct leaves by someone such as Thorkelin, who studied the *Beowulf* portion of the "codex" over a long period. Thus the inscription would have indicated to a clerk at the British Museum to which "codex" the *Beowulf* leaves were to be returned.

Kiernan claims that there are two telltale signs on folio 132r that indicate it had once been the outer folio of a discrete codex. The first is a small soiled spot in the lower right hand corner of the folio which Kiernan identifies with the damage a thumb would inflict as it gripped the outer cover of a book.⁹ Even if this spot is the result of the friction produced by a thumb (and I am unable to see how a thumb could rest easily in that position), the folio simply does not

have the appearance of an outer cover. Kiernan also believes that the heavy rulings on folio 132r indicate that it was an outer cover.¹⁰ As the first leaf and part of the outer sheet of a quire, Kiernan reasons it would have the heaviest rulings, as indeed folio 132r has. If we accept Kiernan's first collation, then the conjugate folio (f. 141v) ought to exhibit equally heavy rulings, but it does not. Likewise, if we accept Kiernan's second collation, then the conjugate folio (f. 133v) ought to exhibit the same heavy rulings, but it does not. If we accept the traditional collation, then the conjugate folio (f. 127v) ought also to exhibit the heavy rulings, but neither does it. Obviously then, folio 132r was individually re-ruled, as well we might expect on the first folio of a new item in a composite codex.

page 21

Kiernan believes that the distinctive styles of capital letters in the three prose works on the one hand and *Beowulf* on the other reflect two discrete codices.¹¹ While this is possible, it hardly constitutes compelling evidence; the differing styles of capitals may just as well reflect differences in the exemplar(s). Likewise Kiernan places great emphasis on the greater care with which the two scribes treated *Beowulf*.¹² Certainly there are more corrections, and more evidence of intelligent proofreading, in *Beowulf* than in the three prose works. Again, Kiernan believes this difference in attitudes towards the texts not only separates the prose works from *Beowulf* as two discrete codices, but also separates them as two unconnected scriptorial projects. This differing scribal attitude might possibly reflect two separate projects of copying, but it may also simply reflect the differing attitudes of the scribes towards prose and verse: the technical requirements of verse require a far greater degree of accuracy in copying. As Kiernan has illustrated, the scribes were not unintelligent copyists; it is perhaps only natural that they should have taken certain pains over a poem such as *Beowulf*, and yet not bothered particularly with the prose works.

Kiernan's most compelling argument for separating the prose works from *Beowulf* is, as he views it, the distinctively differing codicological formats of the two sections.¹³ With the exception of the so called "anomalous" first quire, all the quires before *Beowulf* are essentially gatherings of three sheets and therefore, argues Kiernan, quire 5 must also be a gathering of three sheets. As we have seen, however, quire 2 was originally a four-sheet gathering. Kiernan contrasts the supposed three-sheet format of quires 2-5 with quires 7-11, in which he claims to discern a four-sheet format. As I have illustrated, however, only quires 7 and 9 have an

page 22

original four-sheet format; quires 8, 10, and 11 have an original three-sheet construction. Hence, there is no distinctive contrasting change in format; rather there is a continuity which clearly identifies these quires as part of a single project of copying.

The *Judith* fragment, quire 14, is more problematic. Because there is a gap of unknown length between the end of *Beowulf* and quire 14, it is more difficult to make any conclusion based on continuity in the codicological format of Scribe B's portion. We have three quires which were made by or for Scribe B: quires 12 and 13 are five-sheet gatherings, all the hair sides out; quire 14 is quite likely to have originally been a similar gathering. Scribe B's consistent format is of five-sheet gatherings constructed with the hair sides facing out. It thus seems likely that Scribe B (or the person who made his quires) also made quire 1, as it also exhibits this highly distinctive and idiosyncratic format.

Kiernan has suggested that there is a format difference in the size of the writing frame of the *Judith* fragment.

What makes this especially valuable as evidence is that the number of lines per page in *Beowulf* varies in different quires from twenty lines, to twenty-one lines, to twenty-two lines, and yet the written space between the first and last rulings, regardless of the number of lines per page, is uniformly between 17 and 18 cm., usually about 17.5 cm. This shows that even when the scribes departed from the normal number of lines (twenty), they took care, for aesthetic reasons, to make the written space of all pages throughout the *Beowulf* codex a uniform size. In the case of the *Judith*

page 23

fragment the written space between the first and last rulings is between 16 and 16.5 cm. The difference is distinct, and can hardly be fortuitous: *Judith* was not ruled to fit the same format as the *Beowulf* codex.¹⁴

In fact, the written space in the *Judith* fragment (measured between the first and last rulings) is between 16.6 and 17.1

cm; the average is 16.9 cm. Kiernan claims that the average for this same measurement in the quires of *Beowulf* is 17.5 cm. The actual size, however, is 17.1 cm., which is only 2 mm. difference from the measured average in the *Judith* fragment. It is obvious that *Judith* was ruled to fit the same format as the three prose works and *Beowulf*. Far from separating *Judith* from *Beowulf*, this evidence in fact supports the traditional belief that *Judith* was part of the same copying project which produced *Beowulf*.

One possible impediment to this scheme is the presence of a worm-hole in quire 13, which has no equivalent in quire 14. In other words, when this worm ate his way through the final gathering of *Beowulf*, quire 14 was not next to it. But since the first part of *Judith* has been lost, quire 14 was not originally adjacent to quire 13. It is in the now-lost intervening folio(s) that we would have found traces of the worm. Father Leonard Boyle, on the other hand, suggested that the worm had feasted on quire 13 before any other gatherings had been joined to it, and he may well be right.¹⁵ We cannot know how long the finished unbound quires may have been stored. Certainly quires 12 and 13 were finished before Scribe A's gatherings and a hungry worm would have had ample opportunity to bore into quire 13. Thus, although we cannot be sure when the worm-hole was made, its presence fails to exclude *Judith* as the fifth member of this composite codex.

page 24

Quire 14 (and however many lost folios) was probably copied before quires 12 and 13 as Leonard Boyle has suggested. Kiernan has questioned Förster's conclusion that *Judith* was once composed of twenty-four additional folios before quire 14.¹⁶ It may be that *Judith* is nearly complete and therefore that the outer sheet is all that is missing from quire 14, or any number of complete quires (four sheets, three sheets, or more likely Scribe B's normal format of five sheets) may have disappeared. For the purposes of this essay it matters not at all whether the missing folios contained only *Judith* or perhaps some other works as well. Whatever has been lost comprised Scribe B's first stint of copying. As both Boyle and Kiernan point out, the final folio of *Beowulf* (f. 210v) is crowded with text; the scribe obviously had no more folios, as he would have had with *Judith* still to copy. He must, therefore, have copied quires 12 and 13 after *Judith*. Again, both Boyle and Kiernan have demonstrated that the final portion copied by Scribe B was in quire 11, where he took over from Scribe A. Once again, it is obvious that Scribe B was faced with only so much parchment and a certain number of lines to be written. His solution here was not to crowd them as on the final folio of *Beowulf*, but to add one line of text to four folios (177v-179r). Scribe B must, therefore, have copied *Judith* first (probably in quires of five sheets with all the hair sides facing out), then quires 12 and 13 of *Beowulf*, and finally the remainder of quire 11. Scribe A, on the other hand, seems to have copied his material straight through from quire 1 to 11 before breaking off. If Förster was correct in estimating that one gathering of ten folios has been lost from the beginning of *Christopher*, this gathering may well have been one of Scribe B's distinctive five-sheet quires. Indeed, the first extant quire is just such a gathering. Surely it is no accident that both scribes began their stints with these distinctive gatherings of

page 25

five sheets. This further associates the prose works (quire 1) with *Beowulf* (quires 12 and 13), and quite possibly *Judith* (quire 14) if quire 14 was indeed originally a gathering of five sheets.

In summary, the collation of the Nowell Codex is as Kemp Malone described it in his facsimile: 110, 26, 3-118, 12-1310, 148. *Christopher*, *Marvels of the East*, *Alexander's Letter*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith* make up a single, unified, composite manuscript the Nowell Codex.

Illinois State University

Notes

1. Max Förster, *Die Beowulf-Handschrift*, Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften auf Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse 71 (1919); E. V. K. Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR, 4 (New York, 1953); Neil R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957); Kemp Malone, ed., *The Nowell Codex (British Museum Cotton Vitellius A.XV, Second MS)*, EEMF (Copenhagen, 1963); Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1981); Leonard Boyle, "The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf*," in *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto, 1981), ed. by Colin Chase. Most of the editions have descriptions of

the MS, but no collation. Kenneth Sisam's two articles "The Beowulf Manuscript" (pp. 61-64) and "The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript" (pp. 65-97) in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953) are very useful, but contain no collation.

2. Kiernan, p. 270.

3. Dobbie, p. xv.

4. Kiernan, pp. 159-163.

5. This was a special session, "The Dating of *Beowulf*: Critical Responses to Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*," organized by Allen Frantzen at the 1982 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Los Angeles, December 30, 1982.

6. Humphrey Wanley, *Antiquae Litteraturae Septentrionalis Liber Alter, seu Humphredi Wanleii Librorum Vett. Septentrionalium, qui in Angliae Bibliothecis extant, nec non multorum Vett. Codd. Septentrionalium alibi extantium Catalogus Historico-*

page 27

Criticus, cum totius Thesauri Linguarum Septentrionalium sex Indicibus (Oxford, 1705; reprint, 1970), pp. 218-19.

7. Kiernan, p. 134.

8. See C. E. Wright, "The Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries and the Formation of the Cottonian Library," in *The English Library before 1700: Studies in its History*, ed. Francis Wormald and C. E. Wright (London, 1958), pp. 176-212.

9. Kiernan, p. 134.

10. *Ibid*

11. Kiernan, pp. 140-41.

12. Kiernan, pp. 141-46.

13. Kiernan, pp. 125-26.

14. Kiernan, p. 151.

15. Boyle, p. 31.

16. Kiernan, pp. 162-167.