

[Essays in Medieval Studies 2](#)

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Recent Books on *Beowulf*

Raymond P. Tripp, Jr.

An overview of recent books on *Beowulf* must deal with the implications of critical styles rather than specific arguments and conclusions. In this light recent books show that the study of *Beowulf* has arrived at a crucial turning point, as competing academic and social forces run their course. Disparate scholarly methods, as the expression of philosophical and religious differences, have resulted in a welter of conflicting interpretations. These may be organized, however, in two broad classes with certain subdivisions. There are those books which (1) accept and work within the Klaeber-consensus, and (2) aim at refining this text, deferring overall interpretations.¹ The first category includes varieties of (a) close readers and (b) Christian-cultural historicists or "influence" critics; while the second is divided over the nature of textual objectivity into (c) camera realists and (d) linguistic realists, who differ over the best ways to improve the text. Very few books on *Beowulf* are simple, so that one is to expect an inevitable overlapping of these working classifications.

The year 1975 has been arbitrarily selected as the cut-off point for "recent." This decision, of course, eliminates Arthur G. Brodeur's *The Art of Beowulf* (1959), and even Margaret E. Goldsmith's *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (1970).² Although Goldsmith's book certainly finds more recent counterparts, a sound argument can be made

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that Brodeur's book hearkens more to W. W. Lawrence's *Beowulf and the Epic Tradition* (1928) and to R. W. Chambers' *Beowulf, An Introduction to the Study of the Poem* (1931), and from these to earlier German studies. The cut-off year, however, finds Andreas Haarder's *Beowulf: The Appeal of the Poem* (1975). Haarder belongs to those who work with the poem "as we now have it"; and his is a general study aimed at explaining the persistent attention *Beowulf* has received. He writes from an existentialist point of view; and his tracing of shifting interests and approaches is not directly concerned with reinterpreting the poem. Yet his often provocative observations provide many reasons for doing so. His remark, for example, that "far too little is said about the basic *sameness in variety* of the monster world" (213) points to the key to much of the poet's meaning in his internalizing of the pagan past. Haarder's own view turns on the poem's symbolic investigation of survival, against monsters within and without. He deals less with *Beowulf* than with *Beowulf* studies; and for this reason his book, like others in its class, tends to arrest the deepening of insight into the poem, insofar as this depends upon achieving a more accurate text.

W. F. Bolton's *Alcuin and Beowulf, An Eighth-Century View* (1978) is the next study to appear. It belongs to the Goldsmith tradition (or what would be the Robertsonian school in Chaucer studies). Another earlier book, John Gardner's *The Construction of Christian Poetry in Old English*, which appeared in the same year as Haarder's study, needs to be looked at first, even though it is not entirely

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devoted to *Beowulf*. The basic assumption in all such books is that it is possible to enter the critical mentality of the age of *Beowulf*'s composition and to apply this toward an understanding of the poem. Where Goldsmith selects the sixth-century Gregory I for a model, Gardner chooses the fifth-sixth-century Fulgentius, and Bolton the eighth-century Alcuin; while the most recent contribution to this school, Bernard F. Huppé's *The Hero in the Earthly City* (1984), opts for the fourth-century Augustine. Each Christian-cultural historicist, naturally, has reasons for his particular choice of model; but in spite of disclaimers the problems of historicism itself, rather than the poem, remain at issue.

Gardner, for example, begins his discussion of *Beowulf* with the admittedly weak assumption that the poet knew Virgil's *Aeneid*, and then goes on to say:

If he did, he must have understood the poem not as we do but as the best minds of his own age understood it.... The most famous early interpretation was that of Fulgentius (55).

To avoid the problems of *if* and *must*, Bolton asserts that his effort "differs in fundamental ways from the existing two main schools of *Beowulf* criticism, the close readers and the historical critics" (3). He faults the close readers with naive subjectivism, and the historical critics for a more subtle subjectivism growing out of an indiscriminate selection of sources. He proposes to achieve a valid,

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limited historicism by recreating "a single uneclectic, contemporary English literary sensibility, a viewpoint historically close to the poem" (4), and then to apply this to a reading of the poem. Like Huppé and Goldsmith, Bolton concludes, but for his own reasons, against *Beowulf*, whose "Christlike attributes serve to underscore how he is unlike Christ" (143). Gardner on this point is perhaps more subtle, seeing the hero as "unquestionably Christlike," but also this likeness "as, at least on one level, ironic" (83-4). When the conclusions, however, of Goldsmith, Bolton, and Huppé, possibly Gardner as well, are juxtaposed to those of Allen Cabaniss, Charles J. Donahue, Maurice B. McNamee, and Lewis E. Nicholson, who interpret *Beowulf* in a positive Christian way, the implications of such criticism become apparent. Christian exegesis can lead to opposite conclusions, and from this contradiction it can be seen that any reading of the poem devolves into a close reading of the text, covert or overt, because the critic's Christian-cultural synthesis always requires another term, so to speak, which is nothing less than the *a priori* interpretation of the text to which it is applied.

To be sure Christian-historicists vary in their sophistication, and Bolton's book is more subtle than either Goldsmith's or Huppé's though less subtle than Gardner's. But in the long run, since all such efforts tend to canonize the text as we have it, insofar as they all take for granted an established text grounded in an interpretive consensus, such Christian-historicist books represent the culmination rather than the beginning of a critical tradition. When everything which can

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be said upon the basis of the Klaeber-consensus has been said, and numerous problems remain, then there is nothing else to do but to return to the text. Thus, along with Haarder's book, but for different reasons, the work of Goldsmith, Bolton, Gardner, and Huppé, belong to what might be called a Carthaginian school of *Beowulf* criticism: presently powerful and established, but fated to fall and to be displaced by a new textualism of Roman promise.

After Bolton's study comes Martin Puhvel's *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition* (1979). It too is Carthaginian in its own way. Puhvel seeks to accommodate "the occasional presence of apparent inconsistencies and illogicalities within the poem" (22), through an appeal to Celtic literary tradition. He substitutes a secular for a religious historicism. In this he joins Klaeber himself and Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes* (1972), who both respectively seek to accommodate contradictions with features 'of the original story' (155) or "gaunt unassimilable folktale motifs" (24). But in spite of an awareness of textual contradiction, far beyond that found in the Christian-historicist school, there is no move to re-think the text; it is again for the most part accepted as we have it, along with its conventional interpretation, and the solution to problems is sought outside the poem as such. The logic behind externalist approaches is essentially the same. Puhvel comments:

While artistic incongruity does not necessarily disqualify interpretation, it does add motivation to search for an alternative... (25).

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He then turns away from the poem to the Celtic tradition rather than to Gregory, Alcuin, or Fulgentius, et al. Nothing is really changed, however, for the poem to which he compares the Celtic tradition remains that growing out of the Klaeber consensus.

Douglas B. Short follows with his *Beowulf Scholarship, An Annotated Bibliography* (1980). Short provides an accurately annotated review of *Beowulf* criticism, selectively before 1958, and exhaustively after that date to 1978. This same year, 1980, also sees the appearance of Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson's *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the end of 1972*, which contains, of course, a large section on *Beowulf*. Such impressive efforts represent the completion of the edifice constructed upon the Klaeber consensus. Their danger lies in the implication that the truth of the poem lies in what has been written about it. Such codifications tend to sanctify as

well as canonize and lead away from the poet into histories of *Beowulf* studies or into orthodox scholarship and critical apparatus. Secondary sources, thus, tend to usurp the energies of primary research. Like J. B. Bessinger's *A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (1978) even one might say the forthcoming *Old English Dictionary* however, these bibliographies can be useful, in the right hands, if they are not allowed to sire a new generation of *tertiary* studies.³ And like Christian-historicist studies they too represent a culmination rather than a new beginning. If this can be used as a turning point, rather than the basis for new

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scholasticism, then the effort will lead back, if indirectly, to the poem.

Colin Chase, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf* (1981) is another codifying work. It is an anthology of essays on the dating of the poem, which in arriving at no conclusion serves the same purpose and involves the same risks as contradictory historicist studies and the critical museums called bibliographies. Such Carthaginian studies, perhaps, deserve another classical designation as Janus-studies, because they look clearly in both directions. There is a value or a *meta*-value in complicating without resolving, since by default the question is left open and to use Puhvel's words this "does add motivation to search for an alternative." Studies can no longer at least indulge the old trick of assuming a date and then arguing from it back to the poem. From now on the date and the meaning of the poem, which is to say, its accurate text, are tandem questions. Chase's collection reminds us that most dating arguments are intrinsically historicist and thus externalist. As fundamentally a bibliography of dating arguments it brings to its natural culmination still another approach to the poem. Not without both irony and usefulness, therefore, *The Dating of Beowulf* has accomplished its *undating*, allowing in this way the possibility of a solution to this question.

Kevin S. Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (1981), in spite of its bibliographic-sounding title, is the first genuinely new book about the poem, the first book of Roman promise which aims at refining the text and postpones overall interpretation.

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His book is fundamentally an exhaustive re-examination of the construction of the manuscript, including an examination of key paleographic questions insofar as these are related to the composition of the *Beowulf* codex. If nothing else, Kiernan's study has brought the study of the poem back to the text and away from the Byzantine legalism of secondary sources and academic apparatus. It fails in this sanative effort only when it falls back into too great a reliance upon other books, specifically upon the questionable paleographic theories of Tilman Westphalen's *Beowulf 3150-55: Textkritik und Editionsgeschichte* (1967). "History" is at odds with what Kiernan is trying essentially to accomplish. In all fairness, however, it is extremely difficult to escape the momentum of bad nineteenth-century critical habits. The intellectual honesty, originality, concrete objective achievements in the form of new readings, and academic courage exhibited by Kiernan's study, result in a work of a new order, one which indicates that the crucial turning point in the study of *Beowulf* has indeed been reached and the corner turned.

David Williams' *Cain and Beowulf, A Study in Secular Allegory* (1982) seems to have missed this turn and seeks "to delineate the Cain tradition as it might have been available to the poet and thus to provide a source outside the poem that can be used to clarify the poetic intention and force of elements of the Cain tradition in *Beowulf*" (5). Like Bolton, Williams tries to improve upon the Christian-historicist approach, in this case, by broadening and secularizing it. He acknowledges that the "Latin-Christian

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intellectual traditions" have not led to a "consensus on the meaning of *Beowulf* or its structure," but he blames this "lack of agreement," not upon "the failure of the principle itself," but upon its narrow "theological expression," which should be expanded to include "the general ethical, political, and aesthetic forms that are, properly speaking, secular even in the middle ages" (1). Yet Williams returns in spite of his qualifications to things like "the medieval mind" and "the ideological climate of which the poet was himself a product" (94). The Cain tradition is relevant, because it explained "the continuity... of the evil spirit" "in newly converted states" (98). Everything depends of course, upon how much of the Cain tradition, whatever it may have been, finds its way into the poem and how the poet uses it. Williams is aware of this circularity and appeals to "the apparent themes of the poem," which "makes frequent allusion to kinship, loyalty, peace, war, betrayal, and hatred" (6). Although one is left with the feeling that the Cain tradition is

allowed to explain too much, or little, there is an urbanity in Williams' arguments; and the usual stridency of the Christian-historicist is absent. The essential value of William's study lies, perhaps, in its realization that the author of *Beowulf* was "both propagandist and poet simultaneously" (98). In this he anticipates a subsequent point developed by Fred C. Robinson.⁴ If the first role "is negative. The poetic process is otherwise.... his function as a poet leads him to memorialize the past" (98-9). Williams seems closest to the poem when he thus heeds its own inner context. But it is still Klaeber's poem.

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My own study *More About the Fight with the Dragon, Beowulf 2208b-3182: Commentary, Edition, and Translation* (1983), like Kiernan's, seeks first to refine the text before arriving at any definitive reading of it. It differs from Kiernan's approach, insofar as it does not separate these two activities but recognizes that, for better or worse, the editor and the critic must become one and the same person. I thus break with the Klaeber consensus and the critical edifice constructed upon it, assuming two things only: the universality of language and the accessibility of earlier mentalities through dispassionate study of language. On this basis, I show that the notorious contradictions generations of editors have created and critics labored to explain away, all disappear when the poet is taken humbly at his own word. The result is an entirely new "central fable," at least as far as the dragon episode goes one without a thief (outside of the dragon himself), without an elegiac "last survivor" (apart from the man who became the dragon), and one without an ancient curse (but a pious prohibition), and so on; a story so obviously and subtly "Christian," which is to say "humanist," so as to make the laborious exegetical proof of the matter utterly superfluous. Where Kiernan is the camera-realist concerning what constitutes paleographic evidence, I am a linguistic realist, never separating form and meaning in deciphering obscure portions of the second scribe's handwriting. What we have in common is a vital search for the most accurate text possible. Nor would I claim to be entirely free from the same bad habits of nineteenth-century criticism apparent in Kiernan's work. My own

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effort is less than two years behind me, and I can see already too many places where I was led away from the text by forgetting what I did not know about it.

John D. Niles' *Beowulf, The Poem and Its Tradition* appears later in the same year as my own study. It is a complex book deriving in part from previously published essays and belongs to both critical camps, for it is both about the poem, and about *Beowulf* studies. Niles' chapter titles provide a running list of current academic debates; and in spite of his dependence upon the Klaeber consensus, his commonsense reading of the text as we have it often avoids academic extremes. His reliance upon such things as the concept of the marvelous, the art of the Germanic scop, theories of compound diction, or of the listening audience, and the like, is subtly at odds, however, with his attack upon the equally abstract abuse of Latin Christian letters, insofar as all elaborate academic formulations are essentially externalist. Niles risks a go at the "controlling theme" of the poem (224-34), which in his judgment is fundamentally social; and his concern with the poem's audience brings him into Haarder's territory with the closing remark:

Anyone, perhaps, needs to know how to fight monsters. In addition, the poet's basic themes of *power* and *restraint*, *heroism* and *community* are as relevant to our own age as to England of a thousand years ago (254).

Yet, Niles' study may be one of the last of its kind. He does achieve, to use Bolton's

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phrase, considerable "subtractive rectification," but his study becomes another codification or catalogue, not as a bibliography of essays and books, nor even of arguments about dating, but as refutational summary of current critical debates surrounding the poem. It is inevitably directed, as its title honestly advises, away from the poem. His chapter, "The Fatal Contradiction" (235-47), underscores this fact and reveals the hold of the Klaeber consensus. What emerges is a diplomatic discussion of the "state of the art," and this implies that this art and its implications are essentially sound. Niles goes as far as one can without turning back to the text; and the impression of unevenness his study leaves derives from the inconsistent distance he maintains from both the poem and the tradition.

Three more book-length studies appear in 1984. Bernard F. Huppé's *The Hero in the Earthly City* shows that the Christian-historical approach is in practice ahistorical. Huppé's book is, perhaps, the most strident of exegetical studies.

His statement of premises is characteristic. Acknowledging that the poem may date from the ninth to the eleventh century, he writes:

All these varying dates, however, belong as a whole to the Christian era when the intellectual life of England was dominated by Augustinian and monastic conceptions and constructs. This temporal-intellectual fact provides the opportunity and governs the attempt to recapture some approximate understanding of

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the preconceptions of an earlier age, the meta-linguistic imperatives that directed the poet's concept of his hero, Beowulf (25).

The crux of this apparent truism is, of course, the word *fact* and its implicit mechanical operation of the cultural spirit. It is best balanced against a comment from Niles:

I wish to emphasize that the poem's *alien* kind of excellence could not be predicted on the basis of the other literature of the period (249).

Nor from its theology either. Even the historicist Williams can glance at the possibility that "every poet is unique and capable of intellectual innovations" (10). Huppe's frequent departures and forced interpretations even of the Klaeber consensus explain the diversity and disagreement to which, in spite of reservations, the Christian-historical approach so often leads. The hero is damned from the very outset.

Helen Damico's *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* also appears in 1984 and is an illustration of the fact that all historicist studies need not necessarily lead away from the poem. Her purpose is to enrich our conception of Wealhtheow, not to explain the entire poem. And she frequently departs from the Klaeber consensus whenever her sense of the meaning of statements about Wealhtheow conflicts with critical convention. Damico's limited goal is "to give form and coherence to the leading (although subordinate) female character in *Beowulf* and embodiment of

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interwoven ideas and images of some consequence" (179). The greatest value of her study lies in the evidence it provides for the poet's having consciously edited his material, in order to eliminate such unacceptable themes as incest (176).

Fred C. Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* completes the 1984 crop of books on *Beowulf*. It is a unique essay, locating the poem's Christianity within rather than among the poet's words, thus side-stepping many of the liabilities of the Klaeber consensus. The result is an eminently refined yet Christian historicism.⁵ Although Robinson's approach is inherently hermeneutic, his language is empirical. The phrase "habit of mind," he concludes, is "perhaps preferable to 'literary device,'" for describing the poet's conscious manipulation of a vocabulary semantically stratified along pagan-Christian lines by the "Caedmonian renovation" (40). Through "manipulations of context" (68) the poet controls the connotations of key thematic words, like *metod*, as "Christian God" or Pagan "Measurer." At the outset of his essay Robinson also warns against the many prejudices of the Klaeber consensus and its glossaries, punctuation, and capitalization, etc., all of which lead to "predetermined" interpretations. His caution in this direction places him in both critical camps. He too would combine editorial and critical roles:

By sharpening our awareness of these inadvertent editorial obfuscations, we may come closer to recovering the poem which the *Beowulf* poet bequeathed to us (front matter).

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This is very close to my own announced goal of "removing the weight of accumulated certainties, so that the poem may assume its own shape" (ix). To achieve this end, as I have suggested, the student of the poem needs "every tool from fresh paleography to the subtlest 'textuality'" (21). Robinson is successful in delineating one of the means by which the poet works to resolve the pagan-Christian tensions in the poem, but he does not offer an explanation of *why* the poet sought to accommodate the pagan past to the Christian present, so that "the audience can admire those heroes while remaining fully aware of their hopeless pagansim" (11), "both admired and regretted" (14). He acknowledges the

limitations of his approach (14), but his residual dependency upon the Klaeber consensus very difficult to escape for anyone raised upon it leads him still to apply it to much more than it explains.⁶ Nonetheless, his remains, perhaps, the most subtle of Christian-historicist approaches, the major shortcoming of which is the absence of an epistemological understanding of Christianity as one strand in what C. S. Lewis has aptly labeled "the psychological history of the West."

But, as Robinson himself has remarked in Jess B. Bessinger and Robert F. Yeager's *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf* (1984) one of two recent pedagogical books the brevity of this survey has excluded from consideration concerning the embarrassing diversity of opinions about *Beowulf*:

No amount of irenic scholarly diplomacy will succeed in reconciling

completely the approaches of... (115).⁷

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The omission of the names with which Robinson continues, "Wormald, Bolton, Renoir," is explained by the conclusion of his statement, "and the many other interpreters of *Beowulf*, but fair-minded students will probably find something persuasive in all of them." There is no critical consensus; and, as this survey has sought to suggest, this want of agreement has grown out of a faulty textual consensus. It may be naive, in view of similar diversities of opinion surrounding the work of poets whose work is not burdened with textual problems, to believe that in the case of *Beowulf* a better text will lead to sounder opinions and greater agreement. Yet recent books on *Beowulf* may be arranged into centripetal and centrifugal groups, according to the implications of their stance and essential drift. The present writer is not the only one who hopes "that further studies would concentrate more on the *Beowulf* text itself."⁸ Otherwise, "if we do not have the text right, then much even of the best criticism finds itself in the awkward position of not having been directed to the poet's poem."⁹

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[Note to on-line edition: Works Cited appear at the end of the Notes.--10/00]

Notes

1. By the "Klaeber consensus" I mean that text which emerges from the nineteenth century, from Grein, into the major editions of Holthausen, Klaeber, von Schaubert, Dobbie, and Wrenn-Bolton. See Birte Kelly, "The Formative Stages of Beowulf Textual Scholarship: Part I," *ASE*, 11 (1982), 247-74; "Part II," *ASE*, 12 (1983), 239-75.
2. This date also eliminates other important works which might very well be considered as "recent," such as Edward B. Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), and his pedagogical *Introduction to Beowulf* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), and Betty S. Cox, *Cruces of Beowulf* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1971); not to mention the still earlier Kenneth Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).
3. Bessinger's *A Concordance to Beowulf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) appeared in 1969.
4. *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, p. 41, speaks of "a poet who wished to affirm the distance between Christian contemporaries and noble pagan ancestors while simultaneously poetizing a kind of cultural-linguistic fellowship between the two."
5. In a personal communication, Professor Robinson expressed some doubt about this classification. But it must stand until a distinction is made among Christianity, (Christian?) humanism, and paganism. On this score Cox, note 2, makes eminent sense: "I

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have consistently felt that if I had to isolate the theme of Beowulf assuming that there could be one principal theme I should say that it is how an ideal man should live, and how he should die.... It is a supremely humanistic poem," p. 162-3. These brief remarks, however, cannot do justice to Professor Robinson's essay.

6. One instance of over-extension can be seen in Robinson's application of the appositive style to explain lines 2428-40. He concludes that "*frea wine* and *maeg* bring out different aspects of the relationship between the two men," p. 20, i.e., the two brothers; whereas the sense of the passage is that one son brought the father to despair by accidentally killing the other son. The problem of interpretation arises from too narrow an interpretation of *geswencan*, which does not mean "to kill," but "to vex," here, "to bring to despair." Another instance is Robinson's insistence that the scop's song of creation could be pagan, p.34, in the face of very similar passages which are unquestionably Christian. The monotheistic, anthropomorphic Creator, in spite of scattered hints toward monotheism in the pagan tradition of the North, has a decided Christian ring to it.
7. Another pedagogical work which has been omitted is J. D. A. Ogilvy and Donald C. Baker, *Reading Beowulf: An Introduction to the Poem* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983). Books aimed at teaching, of course, tend to canonize convention. Cf. *The Old English Newsletter*, 18, 1 (Fall 1984), "Unfortunately, in their efforts to overcome the strangeness of the

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poem, Ogilvy and Baker end up rewriting it," p. 90.

8. Joseph F. Tuso, "The State of the Art: A Survey," in *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, pp. 33-9.
9. *More About the Fight with the Dragon*, p. 3. After completing this survey, I learned of M. J. Swanton's *Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700-800: Beowulf and the Burden of Kingship* (Göppingen Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 333. Göppingen: Kummerle, 1982). From the review in the *OENL*, 18, 1 (Fall 1984), p. 91, I would place this work within the Klaeber consensus group. Nor have I commented upon T. A. Shippey's small volume *Beowulf*, *Studies in English Literature* No. 70 (Southampton, England: Edward Arnold, 1978), a pedagogical work which tends to accommodate the poem through attitudinal adjustment and a strong sense of cultural and historical differences.

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