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Alaric Hall



Editorial assistant
Victoria Cooper

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School of English
University of Leeds

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REVIEWS

Earl R. Anderson, *Understanding 'Beowulf' as an Indo-European Epic: A Study in Comparative Mythology*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010. 608 pp. ISBN 978-0-7734-3755-5. £89.95

Anderson describes in his Introduction the three approaches to *Beowulf* that he offers in this book in terms of the following claims: that its narrative voice is mythopoeic; that the world it reflects belongs to a Romano-Celto-Germanic cultural environment; and that it makes use of migratory typescenes. These approaches may be illustrated by an account of his treatment of each of the three monsters in the poem: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon.

By *mythopoeia* Anderson means an acceptance of the view that universals, such as justice, exist separately from their specimens, i.e. individual acts of justice, in a supernatural domain, and are animated by supernatural forces. Grendel is to be seen as such a force, and because of this Hroðgar cannot be accused of weakness in failing to repel his ravages. Only God (another such force, cf. p. 70), or a godsend such as Beowulf, can do this, as Hroðgar recognizes in his words to Wulfgar at ll. 381b–84a of the poem. According to Anderson, this approach obviates the need for discussing the poem in terms of rigid distinctions between, for example, the natural and the supernatural, and the pagan and the Christian: Grendel may be seen as 'simultaneously demonic, human, and monstrous' (p. 105) and Hroðgar as neither an idolatrous pagan nor a Christian, but a monotheist (pp. 126–27).

Anderson's argument that *Beowulf* reflects a Romano-Celto-Germanic cultural environment is perhaps best illustrated by his discussion of the chiasmic parallel 'mægþa cræft, wiggryre wifes' ('maidens' strength, martial power of a woman'), used in relation to Grendel's mother at ll. 1283b–84a of the poem. It forms part of a simile that Anderson sees as comparing Grendel's mother to an Amazon-warrior, a type of figure referred to only obliquely in Old English literature (here and by way of metaphor in the poems *Judith* and *Juliana*, see p. 285). Anderson's main examples (pp. 276–80) are Roman (Tacitus's *Annales* and *Agricola*); Celtic (the Irish sagas *Tochmarc Emire*, *Aided Áenfir Aífe*, and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*); and Germanic (the *Nibelungenlied*, the eddic poem *Atlamál in grœnlensku*, the Icelandic *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, and the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus). His reason for citing these examples is presumably that he sees the stories and motifs they reflect as potential supplements to the narration of this part of *Beowulf*, giving added meaning and effectiveness to the simile involving Grendel's mother when the audience calls them to mind.

The migratory typescenes are scenes of a conventional type (involving battles, feasts, quests, exchanges — friendly and otherwise — welcomes and farewells, etc.) that recur

frequently in the heroic literature of many different traditions. As narrative units, according to Anderson, ‘they embed meaning by virtue of formal resemblance to past and future texts’ (p. 27; future here being presumably contained in time past). Consideration of such a scene in *Beowulf* in relation to its equivalents in other heroic traditions will thus increase our understanding of its function in the poem. This may be illustrated by Anderson’s discussion of Beowulf’s fight with the dragon in relation to the Indo-European tradition of the cattle-raid, known from Indic, Iranian, Armenian, Greek, Roman, and Irish literature. Anderson presents the cattle-raid as ‘a heroic typescene, with four signature themes’ (p. 483), each of which is represented in *Beowulf*: (1) the theft of the cattle is contrasted with the armed combat of the hero (cf. the theft of the cup from the dragon’s hoard, *Beowulf* ll. 2214b–20, 2280b–83a, and Beowulf’s subsequent fight with the dragon); (2) the hero tracks a monster or villain to his remote cave (cf. *Beowulf* ll. 2401–13a); (3) the cattle-raid is sometimes a rite of passage for the hero (cf. the dragon fight as a rite of passage not for Beowulf, but evidently for Wiglaf, who assists him in the fight, *Beowulf*, ll. 2625b–27); and (4) the hero wins the cattle for the benefit of his people (cf. *Beowulf*, ll. 2794–98, where Beowulf gives thanks for having won the dragon’s treasure for his people). Part of the point of adducing this supposed parallel seems to be that it directs our attention to the lines just cited in which Beowulf refers to the treasure as intended for his people, lines that discourage us from thinking, as we might be inclined to do from reading ll. 2508–9, 2535a–37, 2747–51 and 2799–2800a of the poem, as well as Hroðgar’s warning to Beowulf at ll. 1748–50a, that in winning the dragon’s gold Beowulf has succumbed to avarice (cf. pp. 444, 495).

These approaches will strike many readers as far-fetched. It is doubtful whether it is necessary to construct such an elaborate argument — even more elaborate than my summary suggests — to explain Grendel’s triple nature or to clear Hroðgar of the charge of weakness, or whether it is necessary to journey so far afield in order to emphasise the effect of the simile about Grendel’s mother or absolve Beowulf of the sin of avarice. Analogues (cognate parallels) and analogies (coincidental ones) are always interesting, however, and there is no doubt that those adduced by Anderson in relation to *Beowulf* are (in the words of the Icelandic *Ragnars saga*) *betra ... at hafa en án vera* ‘better to have than to be without.’

I must not give the impression that the book deals solely with the monsters. It has twelve chapters, in which hardly any stone is left unturned: in addition to the chapters on mythopoeia (ch. 2), Grendel and his mother (ch. 3), Grendel’s mere (ch. 4), and the dragon’s treasure (ch. 12), there are chapters on Scyld, Beow, and Hygelac (ch. 1); Æschere and Hroðgar (ch. 5); ‘symbolic politics’ (ch. 6, covering Beowulf’s reception in Heorot and adoption by Hroðgar); ‘family charisma’ (ch. 7, covering the passages of lament by surviving fathers for their sons); and chapters on the poem’s rhetoric (ch. 8), its digressions (ch. 9), its battlefield typescenes (ch. 10), and the concepts of *wyrd*, *ellen*, and *geþyld* (ch. 11). There are also two appendices, one developing the Virgilian notion of *aornos* (Avernus) as a birdless place in relation to Grendel’s mere, and the other dealing with epic antithesis in *Beowulf* and *Finnsburh*. Nor must I give the impression that it is only Indo-European examples that Anderson adduces in his support: Mayan, Sumerian, Semitic, Mongolian, Turkish, and Finnish examples are also pressed into service, to an extent that makes the author’s title for his book seem not only modest, but also somewhat misleading.

It should be noted that in this book, published in 2010, Anderson has not been able to make use of *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, fourth edition, edited by R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, and published (by University of Toronto Press) in 2008. Anderson’s remarks

on Queen Þryð on, for instance, pp. 253 and 311, now need to be modified in the light of this edition's findings.

There are many errors in the book, trivial for the most part in themselves, but sufficient in number to distract the conscientious reader from following its argument. The author seems strangely insensitive to the different languages with which he is dealing. It is true that he avoids on p. 4 the mistake *consolation mortis* made on p. i. by Mary P. Richards in her Foreword, but on p. 313 we find *reduction ad absurdum* occurring twice in the same line. Saint Augustine would not have been pleased with the spelling *De civitas Dei* on p. 95, and the spelling *a forteriori*, occurring on pp. 121, 313 and elsewhere, gives a strange impression. Mistakes of this kind are all the more irritating when the author sometimes makes them and sometimes does not: we find *rex inutilis* on p. 4 but *rex inutilis* on p. 165, and *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (to give an Irish example) spelt correctly on pp. 277 and 370 but incorrectly on pp. 114 and 354 (cf. also p. 483). The author's linguistic insensitivity shows itself further in what might be called interlingual anacoluthon: the syntactical and grammatical clashing of one language with another when the two are juxtaposed. It looks odd to see, on p. 177, the Old English dative form *þæm ahlæcan* used as the subject of a present-day English clause, and no less so to see, on p. 290, present-day 'into' (motion towards) followed by a dative form in Old English, (*flodes*) *æhte*, where the accusative would be expected — quite apart from the fact that this is a misquotation from *Beowulf*, l. 42a, where accusative *æht* is found.

Anderson is very prone to error where Icelandic is concerned: we find *Skjöldunga saga* misspelt (differently) on pp. 25 and 36, *Vafþrúðnismál* misspelt on p. 29, 'Grettir Asnundarson' on p. 45, etc., and, worst of all, 'Thorolf, his favorite daughter' (referring to Þorgerðr, the daughter of Egill Skalla-Grímsson) on p. 250. Here it is not clear whether we are dealing with a spelling mistake or a confusion of identities, as in the case (to return to Old English) of Hyld, referred to as Hygelac's queen on p. 311. Misquotations from Old English, giving an impression of only a superficial knowledge of the language, are frequent in the book: witness *on fæder bearm* (p. 41, for *on fæder bearme*, cf. p. 40), *onsend Hygelac* (p. 62), *him alumpe wæs* (p. 108), and *cnihtwesendne* (p. 208). Anderson's translations from Old English are often shaky, giving the same impression: on pp. 101 and 106, for instance, it looks as though he is mistaking the genitive and dative singular feminine adjectival ending *-re* (in the cases of *beorhtre* and *wanre* respectively) for a comparative form. On the other hand he is correct, where so many other translators are in my view incorrect, in translating *on* as 'in' (as opposed to 'on') at *Beowulf*, l. 1366a: *fyr on flode* 'fire in the water' (pp. 129, 135). His own use of English is at times incorrect, witness 'he lay Hreðel's sword in Beowulf's lap' on p. 52 (cf. 'he lay down his life' on p. 140), and his strange use of 'does' in the sentence 'an epic equivalent would be the hero's journey to the edge of the world and back, as Gilgamesh does' (also on p. 140), which finds another example on p. 189, in footnote 77. Nor do such colloquialisms as 'kicked him out of the novel' (p. 76), 'savvy critics' (p. 120), and 'photo-ops' (p. 200) seem to me appropriate to their contexts.

There are, finally, occasional instances of bibliographical carelessness. Ward (1968), referred to on p. 11, footnote 18, does not seem to have been included in the Bibliography (it is presumably Donald Ward, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), and on pp. 210–11 Anderson, quoting at length from the *Odyssey* in translation, appears to switch from one translation to another but neither the footnotes nor the Bibliography seem to give any help in identifying the second translation.

It is difficult to be irritated with Anderson for long, however. His writing style is uneven and at times slapdash, but never lacks life, and his book may give the impression (long though it is) of being a rushed job, but it leaves no doubt as to his enthusiasm for his subject. And the enthusiasm is infectious. We may not agree with all his ideas and comparisons, but he has given us a wealth of comparative material on which to base our disagreements, and a stimulus to develop our own ideas on that basis.

RORY McTURK

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300. Edited by Kari Ellen Gade, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 2. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009. cvi + 916pp. ISBN 978-2-503-51897-8. €140

The second of eight projected volumes to be published from the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages project, itself published in two parts, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* is the companion to *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythic Times to c. 1035*, edited by Diana Whaley. The project aims to produce a new edition of the corpus of skaldic and runic poetry with English translations and relevant apparatus.

As in other volumes already published in the series, this volume contains much introductory material, including lists of abbreviations and of the sigla used in the volume, and a glossary of technical terms. The introduction includes an exhaustive discussion of the manuscripts and editions of the kings' sagas used in this project, a summary of metre and poetic diction, and biographies of kings and other dignitaries who are the subjects of the poetry. This material is useful and generally well laid-out, although I found the choice to order the biographies of kings alphabetically (by name) rather than chronologically (by reign) confusing, making the editor's summaries of royal succession and dynastic disputes unnecessarily complicated.

What is missing in the introductory material is a sense of the political and cultural context. Gade provides a somewhat cursory examination of the prose context of the kings' sagas, for the most part rehearsing an old discussion of the role of poetry to corroborate or verify the prose accounts of kings' sagas. She does suggest a further use for the poetry, in creating an official narrative for events subject to multiple points of view. However, she does not discuss the effect of political and cultural developments from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries on the style or function of the poetry that chronicled this period. Even her royal biographies have a very narrow focus, concentrating on the events described in the poems. As a result, they fail to contextualise these events within the history of Scandinavia or the rest of Europe. This lack is particularly jarring given that the poetry deals primarily with matters of high politics, from the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 and the First Crusade to the emperors of Byzantium.

In the realm of cultural history, this corpus provides fruitful evidence for the contact between Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. Three *lausavísur* from *Orkneyinga saga* in honour of Ermengarde of Narbonne, a prominent patron of courtly literature, point to the growing importance of courtly romance in the Norse-speaking world. As such, this corpus is a reminder that the period in question was a time in which the Scandinavian rulers looked increasingly southwards, and became firmly involved in the political and cultural developments of the high Middle Ages.