BAKER, PETER S. ed. 1995: *Beowulf: Basic Readings.* Norfolk & London: Garland Publishing.

Beowulf: Basic Readings is the first book in a series of volumes that collect classic and recent essays in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies. *(BRASE: Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England.* General Editors C. T. Berkhout, P. E. Szarmach and J. B. Trahern.)

In this first volume P. S. Baker selects essays that show the development in *Beowulf* studies from the 1960s to the present, from the New Criticism to the methodologies that go under the labels "post-structuralist". Most of the articles deal with literary criticism, but the reader can also find studies of metrics, textual criticism, analogies and history; these articles have been part of the standard reading list for the last two decades.

The anthology starts with "Beowulf" an essay written by E. G. Stanley in 1966, a work reprinted repeatedly in anthologies and volumes.[1] The author points out that *Beowulf* is a sophisticated text and rejects the idea that the poem was a primitive text simple and merely based on oral-formulaic structures, and composed by an illiterate bard. The author studies the complex style of the poem, both its small and its large structures, and points out that the poem's sophistication makes extemporaneous composition unlikely:

> The excellence of the poem is in large measure due to the concord between the poet's mode of thinking and his mode of expression. An associative imagination works well in annexive syntax, each in the cause of the other's excellence. At the same time, he is good with the smaller units, the words and formulas which all Anglo-Saxon poets hand to handle. (p. 25)

> Stanley also suggests that *Beowulf* is a great poem because the Christian poet chose to write of the Germanic past and his success lies in that choice: "The elements of Old English poetic diction, the words and the traditional phrases feel at home in the world which they find celebrated in song." (p. 29)

[1] This essay first appeared in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. Eric Gerald Stanley. London, Nelson, 1966, pp. 104-40.

The article written by Larry Benson "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*"[1] accepts the view that the poem was essentially pagan; he attempts to show that the Christian audience in the eighth century was inherited in the primitive history of their ancestors and they felt admiration for their pagan kings and heroes. When Benson wrote this article many critics did not see *Beowulf* as essentially pagan, they thought that the poem consisted of a pagan core and later Christian interpolations. Benson, instead, see *Beowulf* as the unitary product of one poet's imagination. the author reconsiders the "pagan coloring" of the poem against the background of Latin accounts of the English missions to the Continent. This was the period when the English Church was engaged in an intense missionary activity on the Continent and many English monks went to christianise to the Frisians, Danes, Old Saxons and other Germanic tribes, and the study of this attitude "can shed considerable light on the problems raised by the pagan elements in the poem revealing artistry where we thought we detected blunders. (p. 37) The author of the article insists in the same idea at the end of his work as he suggests:

> we owe the survival of the poem to its touches of paganism, for the only manuscript in which it survives was written at that other moment in English history, around the year 1000, when English churchmen were again concerned with the fate of their heathen kinsmen in northern Europe. (p. 47)

The third article of the volume is "*Beowulf* and the Margins of Literacy"[2] written by Eric John; as a historian he examines *Beowulf* as a source of interest from a historical point of view. The author does not read *Beowulf* as a Christian exegesis or an allegory, following Goldsmith's interpretation, or as an outstanding work as a literary text, following Sisam's ideas, the author bearing in mind such interpretations says "so different, so absolutely contradictory, are their conclusions, it is difficult to believe they (Goldsmith and Sisam) are writing about the same poem" (p. 51). John prefers to read *Beowulf* as a feudal poem shot through with the values of a warrior society. He thinks that *Beowulf* is essentially "a poem written from, about, the class of retainers;

[1] This essay first appeared in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. Robert P. Creed. Providence, Brown University Press, pp. 193-213.
[2] This essay first appeared in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 56 (1973-74) pp. 388-422.

it seems to me that the poem has nothing of the hallmark of the learned clerk in it. It seems to me impregnated with the social and personal experience of the retainer." (p. 73) The author rejects the Christian influence and patristic interpretations.

> We need, I think, to rest the theological *Beowulf* for a while, and try out a less familiar sociological *Beowulf*. At the same time we must realise, in my view, that some of the poem, including the qualities that would really enable us to make secure judgements on its literary merits, has been lost irretrievably. It is obvious that we ought to know just how good a knowledge of weapons and fighting the poet had: did his first audience approve his acumen or deride his ignorance? (p. 74)

Fred Robinson is present in this anthology with one of his most influential and known studies "Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterisation of *Beowulf*: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence"[1] The author points out that elements of the marvellous are not uncommon in *Beowulf* as we can see in the poem a fire-breathing dragon, sea monsters and ogres from the race of Cain. Robinson examines in a close reading three passages, the descent into Grendel's mere, the return from Frisia, and the swimming feat with Breca. In these passages, the author suggests that the text does not support the traditional point of view that the hero's strength is superhuman; his interpretation is that Beowulf is a very strong hero, but actually he is nothing more than a man. "The poet's concern to portray Beowulf as a man rather than as a superhuman is revealed in his repeated allusions to the hero's physical limitations and vulnerability." (p. 79) Robinson presents some examples, in lines 739 and ff. we can appreciate that the hero is incapable of preventing Grendel from killing the Geatish warrior Hondscioh. In other text the hero confesses to king Hrothgar that he lacked the strength to hold the monster in the hall and kill him there. Even in the last section of the poem we can notice Beowulf's suffering and death as a human and not as a romance hero. Robinson argues (p. 80):

[1] This essay first appeared in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. Robert B. Burlin and Edward B. Irving. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984. Pp. 119-37. The present reprint incorporates some revisions by the author.

> If we return to the text of *Beowulf* and examine each of the three occasions where Beowulf seems to be temporarily endowed with supernatural powers, we will discover a strange insubstantiality in the evidence for such endowments. In fact, I am convinced that the supposed evidence for a superhuman Beowulf is largely a fiction of editorial interpretation and comment and that Beowulf throughout is conceived of as a heroic man and not as a romance hero.

Greenfield studies *Beowulf* from a formalist point of view in "The Authenticating Voice in *Beowulf*."[1] It is known that Greenfield was a formalist in the tradition of the New Criticism and his essay shows his preference for this methodological analysis. Greenfield hears in *Beowulf* an "authenticating voice that tends to stabilise meaning in the text, if not the text itself". The author identifies four ways the narrator's voice responds to the events and character's of the poem: by distancing them, by contemporizing them, by making ethical judgements, and by stressing the limitations of human knowledge. The voice authenticates a "literalness" in the text, therefore this "voice" does not invite to a symbolic, typological or allegorical interpretation. Greenfield suggests that the secular, concrete, social meaning probably dominated the audience response, and that the poet had a concrete, human interest in legendary material rather than an intellectual interest in theological allegory. The authenticating voice in *Beowulf*, in Greenfield's opinion, obviously is not allegory or abstract ideas derived from exegetical interpretations:

> I should like to advance the hypothesis that the patristic exegetical mode of thought and analysis is but a sub-species of a more universal way of viewing human experience, a way that is embedded in the narrative mode itself, a way that is especially suited for, but not limited to, the epic genre. (p. 108)

Marijane Osborn in "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf."[2] appreciates the positive feelings of the Anglo-Saxons towards their ancestors, an idea repeatedly expressed by Stanley, Benson and Robinson among others. This article represents a modern trend towards viewing the poem as the work of a Christian looking sympathetically, albeit with regret, at

[1] This essay first appeared in *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976) pp. 51-62.
[2] This essay first appeared in PMLA 92 (1978) pp. 973-81.

the pagan past. Osborn thinks that the poet distinguishes "between the levels of Knowledge, the bound of the secular world of the poem and that perceived from our initiated Christian perspective"(p. 112). The author argues that the Christian audience understood certain passages as "Scyld's funeral" and "the Creation song" recited at Heorot in a way that the pagan inhabitants of the poem's world could not; she says that there is no pagan-Christian problem in *Beowulf*, as many critics have pointed out, "Rather than being in apposition, these two elements form an epistemological scheme embracing both secular and spiritual understanding like that presented more traditionally in the *Wanderer*." (p. 122)

C. J. Clover in his article "The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode."[1] offers an analysis of the "flyting", a narrative set-piece common to *Beowulf* and several Scandinavian sources. (A "flyting" consists of an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable setting). Clover analyses the Norse "flyting" as a mythological or heroic unit that may stand alone e. g. *Lokasena* or be embedded in and subordinate to a larger context, the "ferocious ferryman" episode in the *Nibelungenlied*. The author points out different characteristics that can be found in a "flyting", such as the setting of the debate, the contenders and dramatic situation, the structure, the content (most "flytings" consist of boasts and insults) and outcome. Once Clover has presented this literary convention in Scandinavian and Germanic contexts he analyses the relationship of the Unferth episode to the Norse "flyting" and he notices analogies in situation and in the nature of the speeches, in tone and in the use of sarcasm, in the emphatic I/you contrast and the use of names in direct address, in the combat metaphor and in the matching of personal histories and in such correspondences of detail as the charges of drunkenness and fratricide and the Hell curse. At the end of the article Clover suggests (p. 147):

> the recognition of the Unferth episode as a "flyting" illuminates certain of its puzzling aspects … it further makes more comprehensible his subsequent camaraderie, which need not be interpreted as a shame-induced mea culpa as Bonjour believes nor as

[1] This essay first appeared in *Speculum* 55 (1980) pp. 444-68.

> an act of disguised treachery, but simply as a resumption of normal deportment after his temporary stint as formal interrogator.

Roberta Frank analyses in her article "Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*."[1] the probable influence between the large corpus of surviving skaldic verse from the tenth century and *Beowulf*. Frank suggests that the central tale of *Beowulf* could have come from the lips of the English-Scandinavian settlers of the Danelaw and not from the wellspring of folk memory. It is known that the English and Danes in the North soon coalesced into one nation. Recent scholarship tends to stress assimilation and mutual tolerance and even attraction of the two peoples. In the tenth century in the East of England there were two different peoples speaking closely related languages and working within similar political and ecclesiastical structure, therefore there was an appropriate context to develop a poem such as *Beowulf*. The author says that if we accept that the poem came into existence between 890-950, that is to say, in Alfred or Alfred's successors' period, solves far more problems than it poses. Certain passages in *Beowulf* become more explicable if we accept an author and an audience from the tenth-century, for example, the description of Grendel's mere, as we have a text with specific verbal parallels in the conclusion of the sixteenth *Blickling* homily, and some critics have pointed out that *Beowulf* was influenced by the homily and not vice versa. Frank repeats once and again the same idea about a late date for *Beowulf* explicitly expressed in these lines. "Nothing in the bits and pieces of information extracted from skaldic verse was found incompatible with a date for *Beowulf* in the late ninth or the first half of the tenth century; and some facts were more compatible with this period than with any other." (p. 169)

Colin Chase is present in the volume with the article "*Beowulf*, Bede, and St. Oswine: The Hero's Pride in Old English Hagiography,"[2] an essay where Chase develops some of the ideas expressed in "Saint's Lives, Royal Lives, and the Date of *Beowulf*" edited in his well known book *The Dating of Beowulf*. (1983) The author argues that *Beowulf* was probably written in the Viking Age (X th. century) because the hagiographical literature seemed more

[1] This essay first appeared in *The Dating of "Beowulf.* Ed. Colin Chase. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981. pp. 123-39.

[2] This essay first appeared in *The Anglo-Saxons: Synthesis and Achievement*. ed. J. D. Woods and David A. E. Pelteret. Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1985, pp. 37-48.

informed by the heroic sensibility than did that of the age of Bede. Chase based his views on two accounts of St. Oswine's death, one from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the other from anonymous eleventh-century retelling of Bede's story. After comparing both accounts Chase demonstrates that the heroic ideal was alive in late Anglo-Saxon England, but also sheds light on the long-running debate concerning the propriety of Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon. The author, the same as Benson and Robinson, reads *Beowulf* against the background of the Anglo-Saxons' understanding of their own present and past. Moreover, Chase points out that the *Vita Oswine* supports the identification of a conflict in *Beowulf* between the heroic code and the royal responsibility, but it does not support the allegorical or didactic idea that the hero is himself infected with pride or avarice.

Kevin S. Kiernan, in his article "The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded Beowulf,"[1] summarises the complex linguistic and palaeographical arguments of his renowned book *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. (1986) Kiernan dates *Beowulf* in the first decades of the eleventh century, in the reign of Cnut. The author suggests that the poem was under revision at the time it was copied, thus the poem, as we have it today, is contemporary with the manuscript. Moreover, the dating of the script cannot be restricted to the opening years of the eleventh century because if one follows Ker, he says, there is no palaeographical evidence for excluding the writing of *Beowulf* manuscript during or even sometime after the reign of Canut the Great 1016-1035. At the end of the article Kiernan summarises his well known idea about the very late date in Old English period for *Beowulf* with these lines:

> The current state of the text on this folio indicates that it was still in a draft stage when the poem's Old English history came to an abrupt halt. It is well to remember that at this time Anglo-Saxon history was about to come to an abrupt halt too. The poem remains unfinished on this folio to this day, making the manuscript, at least in part, an early eleventh-century record of an early eleventh-century poem. (p. 211)

[1] This essay was delivered as a lecture at the University of Kentucky in 1983; it was printed in *The Kentucky Review* 6 (1986) pp. 27-44. For the present reprints the author has added annotations both supplementting and updating the text.

G. L. Overing examines three of the women of *Beowulf*: Hildeburh, Wealhtheow and Modthryth, in his article "The Women of Beowulf: A Context for Interpretation."[1] Critics have noticed the absent of love and romantic passion in Old English poetry; passion, in fact, is located only in the bonds of loyalty and friendship between men. Women have a very small role in Old English literature, and in *Beowulf* many critics think that they are marginal, excluded figures. However, in the last two decades some articles and books have been published emphasising the role of women in Anglo-Saxon culture and literature. Overing's project is to see what happens when one approaches *Beowulf* with a set of desires different from those that have dominated criticism of *Beowulf* in the past. The author of the article is not concerned only with the desires of the poem's characters but also with the reader's desires. Desire, on the other hand, has been a prominent topic in recent discussion of Old English literature, including obviously *Beowulf*; we desire with the assis tance of the post-modern modes of literary criticism. As Overing says "my broader aim will be to suggest a context for interpretation of the poem in which the operation of desire - that of the characters within the narrative and that of the critics without - may be acknowledged and revalued"(p. 219). At the end of the article Overing has interpreted the women of *Beowulf* following her own desires identified with feminine form of desire and suggests how new questions might be brought to language "by the conscious examination of the interplay of our own desire with that of the text." (p. 254)

M. Blockley and T. Cable present in this volume an article based on the New Philology: "Kuhn's Law, Old English Poetry, and the New Philology". The authors analyse the laws formulated by Kuhn to demonstrate the necessity of reformulating the categories of sentential stress upon which it crucially relies. H. Kuhn made some observations about the positions in clauses of Germanic poetry of a category of words he called "particles" and from these observations he developed two laws governing the placement of these words. Kuhn's First Law (Satzpartikelgesetz) states that all particles in a clause must be grouped together in a dip either before or immediately after the first stressed word; they may not be distributed both before and after the

[1] This essay is based on the final chapter, "Gender and Interpretation in *Beowulf*" of *Language, Sign, and Gender in "Beowulf"* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990. The author has revised it for separate publication.

first stressed word; and they must not be placed after the initial stressed word if it is preceded by a proclitic or an unstressed prefix. Kuhn's Second Law (Satzspitzengesetz) states that if a clause begins with a metrical dip, the dip must contain a particle; a proclitic or an unstressed prefix alone cannot precede the first stressed word.

Blockley and Cable demonstrate in their article the inadequacy of Kuhn's Law as descriptions of Old English poetic syntax and sketch the outlines of a metrical and syntactic theory that will account for the evidence more adequately; they suggest that "our basic argument is that the levels of syntactic representation and of metrical representation must be kept distance." (p. 263) In the last part of their assay Blockley and Cable place their theory in the context of the study of English metrics, and also in the context of the New Philology, the recent movement that aims to reformulate medievalists' traditional approaches to the text in light of post-modern developments in literary theory and related disciplines. They argue that knowledge of current mainstream linguistics is a proven way of gaining new insights into the structure of a death language. To finish with, they say:

> There is a certain bedrock stability to the interaction of sound and syntax in Old English poetry, a stability which generations of readers have intuited, the task of the philologist is to find the description that make those intuitions explicit. (p. 278)

Despite the learned and sometimes passionate arguments the question about dating *Beowulf* remains open. One of the implications of our ignorance concerning the date of *Beowulf* is that it discourages any close interpretation of the poem that depends on a specific period of Anglo-Saxon history; therefore, the poem is of little use, except in a general way, in the interpretation of that history.

R. M. Liuzza examines the date of *Beowulf* in "On the Dating of Beowulf" under two headings, the internal evidence of meter and language, and the external evidence of historical context. In both cases the arguments are circular and often undermined by the instability of the evidence on which they are based. In his opinion the establishment of the poem's date is itself an act of interpretation "one of the hermeneutic activities most productive of knowledge of the poem and its meaning." (p. 295) Liuzza points out that

metrical tests for dating Old English poetry are not reliable in more than a vague way of establishing a chronology of the Old English poetic corpus; actually, many critics today criticise the faith in the metrical and textual evidence because there are many problems in using a purely inductive descriptive system for the purpose of dating Old English poetry. On the other hand, as Liuzza says, "metrical tests for dating tend to subsume all variation under historical causation, thereby ignoring or severely restricting the extent of individual control in a poet's work." (p. 288) Liuzza suggests that Anglo-Saxonists have much to say about the interdependent relation between text and context:

> because trying to draw a conclusion on this matter is one of the most ancient and important questions of our field … When we talk about the dating of *Beowulf* we are talking nothing less than the philosophical foundations of our discipline. (p. 295)

This volume will very likely become a standard book for those students and scholars of Old English and more specifically of *Beowulf* because they will surely find many "classical" ideas but also some thought-provoking suggestions.

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