BJORK, ROBERT E. & JOHN D. NILES eds. 1997: *A Beowulf Handbook.* Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

A Beowulf *Handbook* tries to present a general survey of all the major issues in *Beowulf* studies, from old controversies such as the "Christian and Pagan Elements" or the date and provenance of the poem to discussions that have arisen more recently, such as the question of "Gender Roles" or the impact of "Contemporary Critical Theory" on readings of the poem.

The book is arranged into eighteen individual chapters (each dealing with one of these major themes) in charge of well-known scholars, from those we can associate with the traditional methods of Anglo-Saxon studies, such as Thomas Shippey, to those that work with modern literary theory, as Seth Lerer or Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe.

As it is told by the editors in the preface, every chapter begins by a very brief summary of its contents, followed by an annotated chronology of the different scholarly trends on the matter in question since the very beginnings of *Beowulf* studies till 1994. The core of each chapter includes three main points: first, a general description of the different scholarly reactions to the problem under consideration. Then, the current state of opinion and, finally, an analysis of what, from the point of view of the contributor, is still to be done in the subject.

This book differs thus in organization from the other guides to *Beowulf* criticism we had to resort to before, such as Nicholson's *An Anthology of* Beowulf *Criticism* (1965) or Peter S. Baker's Beowulf: *Basic Readings.* (1995). These were both collections of essays that have become essential points of reference in *Beowulf* studies, such as Tolkien's "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" or Benson's "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf* ". Each essay logically offered only the author's individual vision on the topic, whereas the chapters in *A* Beowulf *Handbook* attempt a general overview, reviewing all important positions.

The project is well executed and, as the editors claim, very useful for "college or university instructors who teach *Beowulf* and are unfamiliar with all the problems attendant on this enterprise" (ix), who can find here a good

overview of the main problems raised in scholarly discussion of the poem. However, the condensation most of the discussions present might make them useless, or at least quite boring for the specialist, who would already be aware of these main problems. On the other hand, they may perhaps be an incomprehensible mess for "nonspecialists who wish to read *Beowulf* with a basic understanding of the poem" (ix). We find, for instance, many paragraphs like this:

> Sutherland (1964) sees *Beowulf* as based on the Gospel of John as set out in the liturgical lectionary. Delasanta and Slevin (1968) argue for a Christological purpose by which the poet seeks to perfect the pagan heroic ideals through submerged references to Christ. Ziegelmaier (1969) … seeks liturgical symbolism of baptism at work … (244).

In this short paragraph, the reader receives a big amo unt of information, somewhat difficult to assimilate and assess if, as it indeed happens, he/she is hardly ever told upon what ground each scholar decided to formulate his/her own opinion or the arguments put forward to uphold it.

This is not in fact very useful for the beginner, who would have to turn to the different references provided in order to understand the basis of the discussion. But this is a problem that cannot be easily solved since, if we were to be explained every single view, this handbook would have needed two or three volumes at least.

The newcomer to the field of *Beowulf* studies would be somewhat puzzled to find, in the contributor's personal account, apparently contradictory affirmations. Irving, for instance, writes first about the "three different accounts of pagan funeral rites of a kind known to be frequently condemned by Christian authorities" (178), claims that "the Danes are said to engage in actual worship of heathen gods"(178), and affirms that "the Danes were pagan"(178). However, he later announces Hrothgar, king of the Danes, to be "the most thoroughly christian speaker of the poem." (185).

This in itself confusing enough but, what would the beginner think when he/she, trying to review Irving's discussion, finds on page 178: "The dominant strategy of the poem might be summed up as 'let's assume these old

heroes were much like us in their beliefs'."? Who, may the contemporary reader ask, are "us"? And what beliefs do "we" share?

Some discussions lack objectivity, since they are colored by the contributor's own opinion, so the reader would be unconsciously led by it. Irving (again!), for instance, is quick to dismiss Fred C. Robinson's Beowulf *and the Appositive Style* (1985), judging it as "misguided and unsuccessful" (187). However, he dedicates a page and a half to praise an article of his own: "The Nature of Christianity in *Beowulf*."(185-86), while he normally dedicates no more than a brief paragraph to other scholarly views.

Special mention deserve the last three chapters (by Alexandra H. Olsen, Seth Lerer, and Marijane Osborn respectively), devoted to relatively new aspects of *Beowulf* criticism, as "Gender Roles" (Chapter 16), the impact of "Contemporary Critical Theory" in the discussion of the poem (Chapter 17), and "Translations, Versions, Illustrations" (Chapter 18). These three chapters especially caught my attention both because of their novelty and their intrinsic interest.

I found particularly interesting the third and fourth points of chapter eighteen, devoted to "Shape Shiftings: *Beowulf* in new forms" and "Illustrations of *Beowulf*" respectively. In the former, Osborn deals with "actual creative adaptations of *Beowulf* into other genres"(351) as comic-books or fairy-tales together with short stories, novels, and even symphonies. In the latter, we find some examples of illustrations that are indeed "creative", such as a "Native-American Beowulf" or a cover drawing from a comic book called "Beowulf: Dragon Slayer", showing our hero fighting "The Serpent of Satan" accompanied by a young woman carrying a sword (in the role of Wiglaf, I suppose.). One of these drawings should have been used in the cover illustration of the handbook, since they are both much more appealing than the Grendel we find there, who looks very much like the Beowulf we have on page 164 by the same author, but with more hair (or feathers, rather!).

The list of translations we find in this chapter is good, though the Spanish reader will not fail to notice some errors, as the claim that Lerate and Lerate's (1986) is the most recent Spanish translation, actually being that by Angel Cañete (1991).

The few problems mentioned notwithstanding, I agree with the editors that this handbook has great value both as a teaching aid and as a source or guide for "graduate and advanced undergraduate students who, in scrutinizing the text of *Beowulf* face a daunting task, although an exilarating one" (ix), such as myself.

In judging the final utility of this handbook, it seems inevitable to borrow Bjork and Obermeier's words when they claim: "all we can say with assurance when asked when, where, by whom, and for whom the poem was composed is that we are not sure. The quandary we thus find ourselves in with these first, essential questions about the poem, of course, has serious ramifications for most, if not all other, interpretations of it" (33).

This is similar to a sentence by James W. Earl, with which I would finish any *Beowulf* handbook:

> We cannot safely use the poem to help us interpret Anglo-Saxon history; we cannot assume the poem is representative of any period, or even, finally, representative of anything at all.

This, I think, is the most important thing to take into account by anyone, whether specialist or not, who writes or reads on *Beowulf* criticism.

Setmaní Valenzuela

Universidad de Sevilla

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