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| **Why Read *Beowulf*?** |
| By Robert F. Yeager *Beowulf*, the rousing Old English poem of man and monster, has been a classroom classic for generations. Its own survival as a text is nearly as epic as the story it tells. *Beowulf*’s presence among us reminds us upon what slender threads our knowledge of the past depends. Only through a series of extraordinary escapes has *Beowulf* come down to us. In the late 900s, two anonymous scribes wrote the story on parchment using West Saxon, a Germanic dialect dominant for literary composition in England at the time. Known among scholars as the Cotton Vitellius A.XV, the *Beowulf* manuscript is modest, measuring only about five by eight inches, and without any illumination. Compared to the three other extant codices containing Old English poetry, Cotton Vitellius A.XV seems rough-hewn, almost journeyman work. *Beowulf* was bound together with four other works in Old English: three in prose (*The Passion of St. Christopher, The Wonders of the East, Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle*), and *Judith*, a poem. *Judith* and *Beowulf* are composed in the unrhymed, four-beat alliterative style characteristic of Old English poetry and are among the earliest wholly vernacular works in the English canon. Why these five works were considered of a piece ten centuries ago is one of the mysteries surrounding *Beowulf*, although the presence of monsters in each suggests that perhaps this was the common thread. It may be this everlasting human interest in monster stories that initiated *Beowulf*’s survival. The whereabouts of the manuscript during the five hundred years after it was written is unknown. We hear of it in 1563, when the Dean of Litchfield, Lawrence Nowell, owned it at least long enough to write his name and the date on the first page. Very likely Nowell saved the manuscript and *Beowulf* from destruction when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and broke up their libraries. From Nowell, again via unknown ways, the manuscript found its way into the famous library of the Elizabethan physician and antiquary Sir Robert Cotton. (It was Cotton’s practice to catalogue his manuscripts according to the busts of Roman emperors standing over his bookshelves; hence the manuscript’s name.) After Cotton’s death, his collection was eventually recognized as a national treasure, and came under the protection of the Crown. Today *Beowulf* rests safely in the British Library in London, along with what remains of Cotton’s books. Miraculously, one might say. In 1731, the Cottonian Library caught fire and much of the collection was destroyed. The codex containing *Beowulf* was scorched. Its pages, made brittle by the fire, continue to crumble. Fortunately, in the early nineteenth century Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, a linguist and antiquary from Iceland, made two transcriptions. Thorkelin’s copies preserved evidence of now missing or faded words. If our possession today of the manuscript containing *Beowulf* is a story of good luck and mystery, the tale of the poem’s making -- as much as we can piece together -- seems similar. A variety of evidence suggests that *Beowulf* began as an oral poem, passed by singers of one generation to the next. It’s a good guess *Beowulf* would have disappeared along with those singers themselves if someone had not caused the poem to be written down around A.D. 1000. No one knows who “wrote” *Beowulf*. Like all early oral poetry, it had as many authors as singers who performed it. The singers may have performed it when warriors gathered in meadhalls to celebrate their prowess at gatherings like those described in *Beowulf*. In fact, it is from this poem that we derive many of the details for our reconstructions of Anglo- Saxon social life. Scholars speculate that the poem may be been shaped by a singer who recited the poem while a scribe took it down or possibly by the two scribes in whose handwriting *Beowulf* has reached us. Did the scribes of Cotton Vitellius A.XV copy their version of *Beowulf* from another manuscript, or did they rely on ear and memory? Alas, they left us no description of their practice and no clues as to how the poem came into their hands. Perhaps settling upon an author might be easier if we could be sure when, where, or why the poem was composed. But with *Beowulf*, even these basic facts are uncertain. *Beowulf* himself seems to have been entirely fictional. There is only one historically verifiable moment in the poem, but this at least gives us an earliest date for that portion. *Beowulf* tells us that Hygelac, lord of the Geats, died in battle against the Frisians. This event is corroborated by the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours (d. 594), who notes in his chronicle that in the year 521 a “Chlochilaichus” (Latinized “Hygelac”) was killed in a raid on Frisia. Proposing that *Beowulf* was composed in the sixth century raises more questions than it answers. Where was it being told, and how did the poem change, as it passed from singer to singer for five hundred years before it was written down in the manuscript we have? Why did people continue to listen to it and keep it alive? Archaic vocabulary and grammatical forms preserved here and there in the manuscript, like insects in amber, suggest a little of the transmission story. From these we know that there were versions of *Beowulf* earlier than that contained in Cotton Vitellius A.XV, but scholars disagree over how many of these were oral and how many written down. Why the poem with a Scandinavian hero exists in Old English at all is a mystery. As a member of the tribe of Geats whose significant adventures took place in Denmark and Scandinavia, *Beowulf* seems an unpromising hero for an English folk epic, particularly in tenth century Saxon England. At the time the manuscript was being copied, Scandinavian raiders had been ravaging English shores for two centuries. This inauspicious timing has been used by some scholars to bolster their arguments that *Beowulf* was composed before the coming of the Northmen about A.D. 790. However, a poem featuring a Scandinavian hero may have been able to flourish at the court of King Cnut, who added England to his Danish empire in 1016. Finally, to the list of mysteries surrounding *Beowulf* we must add the ambiguous role of Christianity in the poem. That the scribes of Cotton Vitellius A.XV were Christian is beyond doubt; and it is equally certain that *Beowulf* was composed in a Christianized England, since conversion took place in the sixth and seventh centuries. Yet the only Biblical references in *Beowulf* are to the Old Testament, and Christ is never mentioned. The poem is set in pagan times, and none of the characters is demonstrably Christian. In fact, when we are told what anyone in the poem believes, we learn that they are idol worshipping pagans. *Beowulf*’s own beliefs are not expressed explicitly. He offers eloquent prayers to a higher power, addressing himself to the “Father Almighty” or the “Wielder of All.” Were those the prayers of a pagan who used phrases the Christians subsequently appropriated? Or, did the poem’s author intend to see *Beowulf* as a Christian Ur-hero, symbolically refulgent with Christian virtues? Any of these issues -- from the perilous history of the single manuscript, to the uncertainties of oral transmission from audience to audience, to the use of a pagan, foreign hero in medieval Christian England -- could have prevented the manuscript from enduring. And yet *Beowulf* is still read and serves as an inspiration. It has influenced classical music (the American composer Howard Hanson’s *Lament for Beowulf*, ca. 1926), a novel (John Gardner's *Grendel*, 1971), animated film (*Grendel! Grendel! Grendel!* with Peter Ustinov, ca. 1982), even a comic-book series (*Beowulf, Dragon-Slayer*, ca. 1975). What is the secret of this poem that has kept it quintessential to the English literary canon? To this question there must be many answers, perhaps as many as there have been hearers or readers of the poem. But certainly common to every experience of *Beowulf* is the sense that its poetry reaches, somehow like lightning, to the core of what we understand about ourselves stripped to basics, even amid the twentieth century world of central heating and computers. Interlaced with the stories of *Beowulf*’s battles with monsters are tales of human struggle and less than exemplary people: Heremod, the wicked king who hoarded people, and put many of his own to death; Modthryth, the queen who arbitrarily executed those who displeased her; and Hrothulf, the treacherous usurper-in-waiting. The struggles the poem depicts are of the good against evil: strength of sinew, heart and spirit, truth and light, pitted against dark power that gives no quarter as it shifts from shape to shape. That the darkness (be it Grendel, a dragon, or treachery, greed, and pride) is familiar only renders it more frightening -- and the more instructive. In the poem’s narrative, challenge is constant and death always waits. True, there are victories -- glorious ones, sometimes, like *Beowulf*’s triumph over Grendel -- but in the end even the hero’s strength and vitality must be sapped by age. And yet, although the poem ends with the death of its hero and the prophecy of extinction for his people, *Beowulf* is not a gloomy work, and our experience of it does not incite despair. That is because, like *Beowulf* himself, the poem never backs away but greets what comes with courage. To this, probably as much as the tales of monsters, or the high adventure, or the blood and gore (of which, relatively speaking, the poem contains little), *Beowulf*’s audiences have always reacted most strongly. Students respond to the lack of falsifying sweetness that would gloss over a world that they recognize as basically an image of our own. From start to finish, *Beowulf* demands our acknowledgment that sorting out the monster from the hero and the coward is a lifetime’s struggle in the dark. *Beowulf* joins us to our ancestors -- whoever they might have been, in whatever far country -- at the top of their game, as we would like to imagine them, and as we dearly hope those who come after will someday envision us.  |