

13 Reflections on Tolkien's Use of *Beowulf*

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Beowulf, the famous Anglo-Saxon heroic poem, and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Author of the Century”,¹ have been thoroughly analysed and compared by a variety of scholars.² It seems most appropriate to discuss similar aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* in a Festschrift presented to Nils-Lennart Johannesson with a view to his own commentaries on the language of Tolkien's fiction. The immediate purpose of this article is not to present a problem-solving essay but instead to explain how close I was to Tolkien's own research and his activities in Oxford during the last thirteen years of his life. As the article unfolds, we realise more and more that *Beowulf* meant a great deal to Tolkien, culminating in Christopher Tolkien's unexpected edition of the translation of *Beowulf*, completed by J.R.R. Tolkien as early as 1926.

Beowulf has always been respected in its position as the oldest Germanic heroic poem.³ I myself accept the conclusion that the poem came into existence around 720–730 A.D. in spite of the fact that there is still considerable debate over the dating. The only preserved copy (British Library MS. Cotton Vitellius A.15) was most probably completed at the beginning of the eleventh century.

¹ See Shippey, J.R.R. *Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 2000.

² See Shippey, T.A., *The Road to Middle-earth*, 1982, Pearce, Joseph, *Tolkien. Man and Myth: A Literary Life*, 1998, Drout, Michael D.C., *Beowulf and the Critics*, 2002.

³ See, for example, Alexander, Michael, *Beowulf: A Glossed Text*, 1995, and McNamara (ed.), *Beowulf*, 2005.

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1. Personal memories of Tolkien and biographical background

I met and was in close contact with Professor Tolkien during the last 13 years of his life. I worked and published *Ancrene Wisse* texts for the Early English Text Society, Oxford University Press, together with an international group of Tolkien-inspired scholars. Tolkien had edited the most important of the *Ancrene Wisse* texts (MS. Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402) in 1962, and I later edited three of the other MSS. In that period I sometimes got first-hand evidence of his views on both the anonymous *Beowulf* and his own *The Lord of the Rings*. I often wondered why Tolkien was so keenly interested in discussing scholarly matters with me as a much younger person. I soon realized that the fact that I represented the Nordic countries and was able to pronounce the languages and also some of the dialectal variants made a great impression on him. Once I selected a text from the Gospel according to St. Mark and read it in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, as well as in Gothic. The Gothic text was taken from Wulfila's translation of the new Testament into Gothic, probably produced at Ravenna but now kept as the magnificent Silver Bible from c. 550 in Uppsala, written with silver and gold ink on purple-coloured parchment. I could understand Gothic fairly well but Tolkien could speak the language, and amazingly enough, he was able to construct words in Gothic that would have been regarded as real, if the corresponding texts and contexts could have been expected in written form. I should like to regard this as a kind of oral emendation. It may be seen as one of Tolkien's most remarkable gifts as a linguistic scholar.

Tolkien was extremely fond of telling stories, remembrances and comparisons between different types of medieval literature. His interest in all literature after Shakespeare was said to be next to negligible. The meetings I had with Tolkien in his homes, first in Sandfield Road outside Oxford and later in his flat in Merton Street, close to Merton College, were structured according to one and the same pattern. Tolkien did most of the talking and I was the attentive listener, with the option of asking questions at irregular intervals. His eloquent talks were similar to well-structured animated oral essays.

An interesting point about Tolkien's time as a new professor at Oxford is the fact that it coincides rather well with C.S. Lewis becoming a tutor in English and at the same time a fellow of Magdalen College. The two of them were to mean enormously much to each other as colleagues and friends but also as critics and competitors. They each became a springboard for the other in questions that extended from a dry syllabus to Nordic mythology, from marriage to the existence of a God, from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Lewis's *Narnia*.

Lewis's note in his diary from 13 May 1926 concerning Tolkien (pp. 392–93), before they had become good friends, is a good example of Lewis's combination of mental agility and wit:

Tolkien managed to get the discussion round to the proposed English Prelim. I had a talk with him afterwards. He is a smooth, pale, fluent little chap—can't read Spenser because of the forms—thinks the language is the real thing in the school—thinks all literature is written for the amusement of men between thirty and forty—we ought to vote ourselves out of existence if we were honest—still the sound-changes and the gobbets are great fun for the dons. No harm in him: only needs a smack or so. His pet abomination is the idea of 'liberal' studies. Technical hobbies are more in his line.

When Tolkien had been established as professor and scholar at Oxford after 1925, he started on a new phase of his career, devoting much time to the critical essay. He incorporated this type of essay as a genre in English philological contexts. Several of his essays from the end of the 1920s to the end of the 1950s, through all his active life as professor, point back to important lectures that he was invited to give both in and outside Oxford. This genre in Tolkien's writing is the very core of his scholarly achievement. His philological activity with his editions of *Sir Gawain* and the *Ancrene Wisse*, his word studies and his translation of Middle English poetry into Modern English are examples of his solid learning, but it is within the art of essay-writing that he can introduce innovative ideas and new results.

Tolkien managed to develop this part of his activities into a kind of mastership. An example is the essay from 1929, which describes how he identifies the new literary language from 13th-century England, the so-called AB-language. There are also, besides "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", important essays such as "A Secret Vice" (1931), "On Fairy-Stories" (1939), "On Translating Beowulf" (1940), "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (1953) and "English and Wales" (1955).

I realized that I had found the origin of this art of essay-writing when I first set eyes on the series of essays and summarizing notes kept in the note-books in the Tolkien Collection from 1913 at the Bodleian Library. Naturally, these mature essays are the result of the tradition of essay-writing characterizing the whole of the English school system. On top of that, the tradition at the universities was that the students wrote essays for a tutor every week, which were read, analyzed and criticized in every detail.

The Tolkien material kept at the Bodleian Library is considerably larger than what one can imagine here from a brief summary. If we add

the collection at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we end up with a great number of texts, which may be used for analyzing the whole background of Tolkien's interest in medieval literature and his ability to write analytical essays within Old and Middle English philology.

Tolkien always felt an irresistible eagerness to throw himself into new research projects, new languages and new problems. One way of learning about his intellectual curiosity is to read through his own preserved letters and notes. In the Tolkien Collection at the Bodleian Library, under item A 21/1-12, there are among other things a series of essays or philological annotations from the period May-June, 1913, and later. Nr A 21/1 contains essays within the following varied areas:

1. Gradation [vowel-changes, for example from 'i' or 'e' to 'a'].
2. The origin of the English people.
3. Some sound changes.
4. Chaucer's language.
5. *Deor's Lament* (an Old English poem).
6. Anglo-Norman.
7. Scandinavian influence on English.
8. The Old English poem *Waldere*.
9. Dialect problems.
10. Lengthening of short vowels in Middle English (1100-1500).
11. Classifying consonants in Old English (700-1100).

The first impression one gets from this fascinating material is that Tolkien is capable as a student only after a year's study to draw advanced conclusions about etymology and philology, which normally fit the work of an accomplished scholar. At the same time he is ambitious enough to make careful notes about sound-changes and etymologies described in the best known handbooks in Old English. It is also fascinating to study the attention he pays to the use of a clear handwriting and an unusually elegant calligraphy.

In the part of the manuscript collection from 1913, No A 21/2, there are notes about lectures that Tolkien attended on historical grammar with references to well-known philologists, such as Sisam, Emerson, Napier and Morsbach. Nr 21/5 is particularly interesting with all its comments on *Beowulf*, both its contents and language. Tolkien refers to passages in *Beowulf*, dealing with legendary persons as well as geographical names related to Denmark. The Danish king Rolf Krake (=Hrothulf in *Beowulf*) and place-names such as the old village of Lejre (=Hleidr; Lat. Lethra) outside Roskilde could be mentioned here. In the

historical little village of Lejre, archaeologists have recently excavated the rest of an impressive hall similar to the great hall Heorot, where Beowulf fought against the monster Grendel in the poem. This excavated hall at Lejre corresponds closely to the one depicted in the poem.

2. Tolkien and *Beowulf*

The view of the American scholar Michael D.C. Drout is that Tolkien was greatly inspired by the poem *Beowulf* and that Tolkien's "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (edited by Drout in 2002) is a point of origin of modern *Beowulf* study. Tolkien may not have been the only scholar to have helped to change the direction of *Beowulf* studies and the attitude to the poem, but he was the driving force with very sound arguments, which led Michael Drout to call the essay "the single most important critical essay ever written about *Beowulf*" (Drout, *Beowulf and the Critics*, 1).

The critics had earlier regarded *Beowulf* as an important historical or philological work with uncertain literary qualities. Tolkien's essay became a distinct turning-point, even a revolution in the discussion of the poetic value of the poem. Tolkien could indicate that *Beowulf* as poetry is more beautiful and every line more significant than those of other Old English poetry.

Previously scholars had regarded *Beowulf* as an epic poem consisting of two separate parts which did not hang together very successfully. Tolkien proves very clearly that the poem forms a unity of two connected parts, which help to create a poetic wholeness. In contrast to previous critics Tolkien makes clear that the structure is remarkably strong. He calls the structure inevitable and the design of the poem admirable. Tolkien also argues convincingly that Beowulf's various adversaries, i.e. Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon are the central entities in the poem.

Tolkien was greatly engaged in all aspects of the extensive lost literature within the whole Indo-European language area. At some of our meetings we discussed that topic most vividly in relation to the Old English poetic fragments. We also discussed the fascinating book, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*, originally published in 1952 by R.M. Wilson, but which had appeared in a new and revised edition in 1970. The whole of the great lost treasure of ancient literature is a most relevant key area for the understanding of Tolkien's thinking in building up a whole fictional world in an age different from his own.

Already at school, Ronald began to read *Beowulf* in Old English, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Middle English and several Icelandic tales in Old Icelandic. Through his deep knowledge of many languages

he became a precocious philologist, who could combine language and literature research at an advanced level even at the age of 15–16.

A working philologist needs not only to read, analyze and compare a large number of literary texts. A medieval philologist must also study palaeography, meaning the knowledge of manuscripts, characters and styles, the relations between the manuscripts, and much else regarding the cultures where the manuscripts belong, and also be well acquainted with the medieval manuscript collections in England.

It is of course a great advantage for a scholar to have easy access to the great manuscript collections in, for example, Oxford, Cambridge and London. For Tolkien it was important to have his favourite texts *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain* in London and *Ancrene Wisse* (MS. Corpus Christi College) in Cambridge. The various college libraries in Oxford and Cambridge are often well equipped as regards medieval manuscripts. The unique medieval library at Tolkien's own college, Merton, owns, for example, a copy of the Latin version of *Ancrene Wisse*, published by the Early English Text Society in 1944. This library at Merton creates a most remarkable atmosphere. Once I was guided by Tolkien himself through the library, where some of the medieval manuscripts were so valuable that they were chained to the shelves.

The poem *Beowulf* appeared in a new translation into Modern English in 1999 by the Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney. In the same year Seamus Heaney was invited by the University of Copenhagen to Lejre near Roskilde in order to read from his English translation in the excavated great hall mentioned above. He read with special focus on the passage in the heroic poem where the huge monster Grendel enters the great hall Heorot and walks towards the sleeping Danes. Since I had taken the initiative to invite Heaney to read and myself read the original Anglo-Saxon text passage before Heaney in this reconstruction of the special *Beowulf* atmosphere of the sixth century, it was a pleasure for me to link all this to Tolkien, who had meant so much to *Beowulf* research in the 1930s.

A great part of the Germanic treasure of heroic legends has disappeared in the course of time and in the relevant countries only a small part is still extant. The only fully preserved long heroic poem in England is *Beowulf*, and furthermore there are only two short poems, *Widsith* and *Deor*, and the two fragments, *Waldere* and *Finnsburg*. Tolkien rewrote and commented on all these texts in various ways. Both *Deor* and *Waldere* belong to the areas he wrote essays about in his notebooks.

The heroic poetry from Anglo-Saxon times seems after this brief presentation to be rather modest in size, but important considering that a great deal of what once existed is no longer there. The fact that *Beowulf* in the first place, but also the other, shorter poems caught Tolkien's interest was not only due to their literary qualities but also to their fates as manuscripts and their connections with other literary traditions within the Germanic mythological field. All names of heroes in the Germanic traditions and legends circulating through references to Gothic, Burgundian, Icelandic, and to other myths indicate that they were current in oral traditions in Anglo-Saxon England. The absence of written tales of these legends may possibly indicate that the literary traditions survived in oral form.

As Tolkien mentioned himself in his letters,⁴ he had been influenced by *Beowulf* during his work on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, some names from *Beowulf*, such as Eomer, Hama and Wealhtheow appear in *The Lord of the Rings*.

It has been known for a long time that Tolkien made a translation of *Beowulf* in the 1920s. He finished it in 1926 and put it aside perhaps without actually wanting to publish it. It could very well have served as a kind of working copy to be used in connection with lectures or citations or commentaries for a text edition. Now suddenly, in 2014, Christopher Tolkien has published an edition of *Beowulf, a translation and commentary, together with Sellic Spell* (HarperCollins Publishers). Christopher Tolkien's edition is a complete prose translation of *Beowulf* made by his father.

It is fairly well known that Michael D.C. Drout was involved in editing Tolkien's translation of *Beowulf* at the beginning of the 21st century. It may therefore be of interest to know that Drout's edition was discontinued before it was ready for publication. Drout had received the permission of The Tolkien Estate to publish a two-volume edition including some of the comments on textual problems written by Tolkien. Drout had planned to edit the partial verse translation and a complete prose translation. The companion volume was supposed to include commentaries made by Tolkien. Before Drout had finished the project, the permission to publish his edition was withdrawn by The Tolkien Estate.

As a great surprise to many, the translation of *Beowulf* by J.R.R. Tolkien was suddenly published by HarperCollins in 2014 with Christopher Tolkien as editor. Christopher has also included his father's

⁴ See a letter to *The Observer*: "*Beowulf* is among my most valued sources"; *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. 31.

Sellic Spell, a ‘marvellous tale’, which, as Christopher suggests, is in the form and style of an Old English folk-tale of Beowulf with no connection with the ‘historical legends’ of the Northern kingdoms.

Furthermore, Christopher included two versions of his father’s *Lay of Beowulf*, which is a rendering of the story in the form of a ballad supposed to be sung, now a clear memory after more than eighty years of Christopher’s first acquaintance with Beowulf and the golden hall of Heorot. With very little imagination needed, one may quite easily hear J.R.R. Tolkien’s voice singing the first stanza of the later of the two poems *The Lay of Beowulf*, called ‘Beowulf and the Monsters’:

Grendel came forth at dead of night;
 the moon in his eyes shone glassy bright,
 as over the moors he strode in might
 until he came to Heorot.
 Dark lay the dale, the window shone;
 by the wall he lurked and listened long,
 and he cursed their laughter and cursed their song
 and the twanging harps of Heorot.

Tolkien’s translation of *Beowulf*, as presented by Christopher, is all in prose, as mentioned above, starting in the following way:

Lo! The glory of the kings of the Spear-Danes in days of old we have heard tell, how these princes did deeds of valour. Oft Scyld Scefing robbed the hosts of foemen, many peoples, of the seats where they drank their mead, laid fear upon men, he who first was found forlorn; comfort for that he lived to know, mighty grew under heaven, throve in honour, until all that dwelt nigh about, over the sea where the whale rides, must hearken to him and yield tribute – a good king was he!

The Anglo-Saxon original looks as follows:

/Hwæt we Gar-Dena in geardagum,
 þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
 Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
 monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
 egsode eorl[as], syððan ærest wearð
 feascaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad,
 weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,
 oðþæt him æghwylc þ[ær] ymsittendra
 ofer hronrade hyran scolde
 gomban gyldan, þæt wæs god cyning!//

In order to make the contents of the beginning of the poem even more clear, I conclude by presenting Seamus Heaney's translation of the same lines into modern English:

/So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.
There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king./

While Christopher Tolkien presented his father's translation of the text into modern English prose, Drout, on the other hand, had announced that he had planned to use both prose and part poetry.

Whether the text of Christopher Tolkien's edition could have been expressed more clearly, if his edition had included both prose and part poetry, is not easy to say. The fact that this edition is now out is, however, an astounding event in itself. In whatever case, the special relations between Tolkien and *Beowulf* are clearly made public and are often well illustrated through Christopher Tolkien's publication.

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