Howell Chickering, Allen J. Frantzen and R. F. Yeager (eds) *Teaching Beowulf in the Twenty-First Century*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 449, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies: Tempe, AZ, 2014. 208 + viii pp.

The canon of great English literature now begins with *Beowulf*. The Anglo-Saxon poem is a more recent entry than Chaucer, who was labelled as the 'father of English poetry' by Dryden as early as the seventeenth century, but its reputation grew throughout the twentieth century and, at the beginning of the twenty-first, its popularity is felt not only in academia but also in popular culture. *Beowulf* is a common starting point for introductory courses to English literature and recent years have seen film adaptations, a tv-series and an exceptionally successful translation by Seamus Heaney.[1] His translation sold more copies than any other poem by him or any other translation of *Beowulf*, helping the poem reach a wider 'readership' than ever 'in its long history' (p. 78). Moreover, through Tolkien, the influence of the poem with its dragons and treasure hoards can be seen in the recent *Hobbit* films and, less directly, *Game of Thrones*. At the same time, the value of humanities is often questioned in public discussion, departments face funding cuts, and philology and the Old English language are taught less and less, which makes it rare to find students with sufficient skills to understand the poem in its original language.

It is into this challenging and mildly absurd situation that a new contribution appears, *Teaching Beowulf in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Howell Chickering, Allen J. Frantzen and R.F. Yeager. The volume is intended to update

---

[1] Heaney, Seamus, *Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition*, illustrations edited by John D. Niles, W. W. Norton: New York, 2008.

and replace a book from 1984[2], and the editors state that many things have changed since the 1980s. The poem is taught more, but often quickly and superficially as a part of the 'Survey of English Literature' in American Universities (p. 1). The editors, who are 'distressed at the hegemony of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*'[3] and the 'default pedagogy rampant throughout higher education' (p. 4), state that they have, above all, two 'hopes' for the volume: first, to emphasize the value of *Beowulf* as a poem (p. 3), and, second, to help the teachers navigate 'amid an array of texts and artefacts, especially when the poem is taught in translation' (p. 3).

To meet its aims, the volume is divided into two main sections: *Materials*, which 'concerns materials every teacher requires, including editions, translations, handbooks, adaptations, and electronic and multimedia resources,' and *Approaches*, which 'describe[s] approaches to these and other materials' (p. 2). The latter section is considerably longer and is divided into *Course models* and *Cultural models*, which are both further divided into various subsections. The format of the volume is short essays of ca. ten pages, twenty-six such chapters altogether. A typical chapter will include an assessment of the scholarship with its particular area of focus, an overview of previous scholarship, and a description of the course context for teaching *Beowulf* in the institution in which the particular scholar is based. Many chapters take a very a practical approach to teaching. Some give course plans as attachments. All include a useful bibliography in footnotes, which along with the chapter will provide a good starting point for the teacher preparing a class or course on *Beowulf*.

Some of the chapters are very neutral in tone; some surprisingly argumentative. For example, the chapter on 'Gender in *Beowulf*' (pp. 205–213) by Allen J. Frantzen is critical of scholarship in which gender 'has become an all-purpose term for women' (p. 205). Frantzen goes on to argue that while recent scholarship has sought to redress the balance of traditional history by focusing on women and minorities, most men are 'merged into the patriarchal structures of medieval cultures and literatures, as if all men rather than some men benefitted from patriarchy' (ibid.). That is, the experience of the vast majority of men, those not belonging to religious or secular elites, is as much underrepresented in medieval literature as that of women or sexual minorities. A lecturer who is preparing a

---

[2] Bessinger, Jess B. and Robert F. Yeager (eds), *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, Modern Language Association: New York, 1984.

[3] *Norton Anthology of English Literature* <https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/>

class on *Beowulf* and gender studies is, in the intellectual climate of 2010s, probably more likely to look for information on the representations of women and minorities than a 'meninist' perspective, but the prospective *Beowulf*-teacher should find him- or herself well-served by the bibliography of the chapter.

The first section *Materials* is divided into three subsections *Texts*, *Adaptations* and *New media,* giving an overview of the various editions, translations, and handbooks, as well as film adaptations and electronic and mass media available to instructors. The emphasis varies somewhat, partly due to the different preferences of each scholar, partly due to the requirements of the subject matter. R.M. Liuzza's chapter on 'Editions' (pp. 5–4) focuses on what is 'by general consensus' regarded as the only 'real option' (p. 5): Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf.* He then goes on to give a very lively account of the genesis of this monumental work, 'rooted in the rigorous German scholarship of the nineteenth century' and revised 'under almost unimaginably difficult conditions in Berlin during and after the Second World War' (p. 6). A major part of the chapter consists of a critique (pp. 6–9) of the 'Fourth Edition' of Klaeber by R. D. Fulk and Robert E. Björk (2008), which is contrasted with the edition by Mitchell & Robinson (p. 9), regarded as more suitable for 'some classrooms' (p. 5)[4].

The chapters on translation and handbooks, in contrast, describe completely different situations in which instructors can choose from a wealth of good options available. Both Howell Chickering's chapter on Translations' (pp. 15–26) and Andrew Scheil's chapter on 'Handbooks and companions' (pp. 27–37) are balanced overviews written in a neutral tone and keeping the teaching situation in mind. Both make their subject accessible and articulate their principles in making various generic divisions, as well as reasons for individual preferences. The initial three chapters are all expertly written overviews by experienced scholars with extensive experience of scholarship in *Beowulf*, which should prove handy for anyone new to teaching the Anglo-Saxon epic.

The organisation is not as good when it comes to film adaptations of *Beowulf,* as information about them is scattered across three articles with some overlap. Paul Acker (pp. 39–44), '*Beowulf* at the movies' lists four film adaptations of *Beowulf,* released between 1999 and 2007 (p. 39), but only focuses on two of them, *Beowulf* (2007) and *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999), describing how he has made use of them in his teaching. One of these, *"The Thirteenth Warrior"* (spelt *"13th Warrior"*

---

[4] Fulk, R. D., Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th ed., University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2008; Mitchell, Bruce and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 8th ed., Wiley-Blackwell: Malden, MA, 2011.

in this chapter), is also discussed at length by Martha Harley in her chapter on '*Beowulf* and the New Media' (pp. 45–53),[5] which describes a video conference collaboration between American and Irish students that focused on the film. The two film adaptations not discussed by Acker or Harley are discussed by Sheila J. Nayar in her chapter '*Beowulf* and Modes for Understanding Oral Narrativity', found in section three as the second to last chapter of the book. On the positive side, the chapters by Acker and Harley are both very practically oriented. Both give descriptions of their courses, with the instructions given for students for carrying out course assignments (p. 40), a worksheet for video discussion (p. 52) and instructions for setting up an intercollegiate classroom (p. 53), which will make it easy to teach similar courses. The chapters have much in common with chapters in the second section of the volume, which gives the volume cohesion and makes it useful as a practical aid for course design.

The final chapter in the first section, in which the author's personal experience gives good insight into the field, is Kevin Kiernan 'Alternating Currents in the Electrifying Classroom' (p. 55) on digital resources. Interestingly, Kiernan's assessment of the current situation is that it has deteriorated since the early digital period of 1995–2005, as there are many sites that no longer exist or are no longer updated. Moreover, *Beowulf* is particularly problematic for the Google search engine, as serious scholarly sites are mixed with promotional materials for the most recent film version of *Beowulf*, and the students may need help in singling out which online resources are most useful. The chapter also gives ideas for the classroom, using the *Electronic Beowulf* and manuscript facsimiles as teaching aids, making it an excellent contribution.

The section on *Course Models* is divided into three subsections, *Teaching Beowulf in Old English*, *Teaching Beowulf in Translation* and *Teaching Beowulf in Writing Courses*. It is revealing of the current state of teaching Old English at universities that a greater number of chapters focus on using the translation than the original. Martin Chase, the author of 'Teaching Archetypal Themes in *Beowulf*' (pp. 195–203), is among the fortunate few, as he is able to teach *Beowulf* over two years, starting with *History of English* in the first year, followed by an introductory course into Old English and *Beowulf*, but teachers in the vast majority of institutions can only dream of such curricula due to one or more of the problems listed by Jerome Denno, including: 'first year students' aversion to the pre-modern; the constraints of the liberal arts core; the abandonment of medieval requirements for English literature majors; dwindling enrollments; cuts in faculty and

---

[5] In a minor copy-editing issue, Acker calls the movie *The Thirteenth Warrior* and Harley *The 13th Warrior*.

other resources' (p. 97). All this means teaching *Beowulf* to students who have no prior knowledge of the Old English language.

A couple of chapters aim explicitly to address the above situation. Jerome Denno's 'Teaching *Beowulf*: four seminar contexts' (pp. 97–103) offers three contexts in which *Beowulf* can be included. They are British Literature Survey, Medieval Survey, Epic Genre Survey and the Senior Seminar for graduating majors. Another chapter, R. F. Yeager's 'Teaching *Beowulf* in the British Literature Survey' (pp. 89–95), is aimed for the 'the department's new hire', who has 'for whatever reason […] drawn the portion of the British Literature Survey that includes *Beowulf*' (p. 89). Yeager gives a four-week plan for teaching *Beowulf* in such a context, which may be too ambitious for many universities, but can, of course, be shortened and applied according to the particular requirements.

Some teachers have found ways of including Old English language in courses aimed at people with no prior skills in it. One bold chapter, by Nicole Guenther Disconza, '*Beowulf* as Introduction to Old English' (pp. 67–74), describes an approach in which the first part consists of a crash-course in Old English grammar, using Baker's *Introduction to Old English* (2012)[6], in addition to which each student reads through a translation of *Beowulf*, which gives them an overview of the poem, and the second part dives right into working with the Old English text, using Klaeber's edition. The workload demanded from the students and instructor is considerable, but she reports that many of her students have emerged from 'wrestling monsters' in the hybrid course 'alive and energized' (p. 74).

A more modest approach is offered by Andrew C. Troup in 'Relativization and Style' (pp. 113–120). Troup, like many others, teaches at a regional state university with a primary focus on teacher training for students who 'are not expected to have any background whatsoever in Old English, the history of the English language, medieval literature, or medieval history' (p. 115). Nevertheless, he is able to include some Old English grammar through a simple exercise on three ways of indicating a relative clause by explaining their function (using Mitchell and Robinson) and by making the students analyse the semantic and stylistic implications of their use in a number of examples in *Beowulf*. This quick and simple exercise will provide students who have no prior knowledge of Old English with an understanding of the language which they could not get through modern translations.

---

[6] Baker, Peter S., *Introduction to Old English*, 3rd ed., Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, 2012.

In addition, perhaps surprisingly, as one would expect a direct focus on the best-selling translation of the poem which is also the version included in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Daniel Donoghue's chapter, 'Using Heaney's Translation to teach *Beowulf*' (pp. 75–82), actually describes a 'stealth course' in Old English. The course requires of the students six weeks' learning of Old English (using Baker 2012), weekly close reading of *Beowulf*-segments, comparing Heaney's translation to the original (p. 77), reading four early reviews of Heaney's translation (pp. 78–79), and making their own translation of fifty lines of *Beowulf* as a part of the final essay.

Other interesting approaches to teaching include Michael D.C. Drout's chapter on '*Beowulf* read out aloud' (pp. 83–88), which describes an approach focused on memorizing and reciting *Beowulf*, making a reference to different types of learners (auditory, visual and kinesthetic) and Tolkien's examples of how the rhythmic patterns of Old English poetic lines are reflected in Present-Day English (p. 87). Another novel approach can be found in Brian Castle's 'Using *Beowulf* to teach argumentation' (pp. 121–128). He starts the course by claiming that *Beowulf* is a metaphorical narrative of the main character's impotence - a claim that elicits 'opposition from students – vehement from some and at least some incredulity from the rest' (p. 121). He then challenges the students to refute the claim by constructing a literary argument against it, based on close reading of the poem and supporting it by secondary literature. In a less polemic chapter, William A. Quinn (pp. 129–137) uses *Beowulf* in a creative writing class with more advanced students.

As the editors mention, 'the largest section of essays concerns cultural models that contextualize *Beowulf*, both traditional and contemporary' (p. 2). This final part is divided into three sub-sections: a) traditional contexts (gift giving and social tension, the Bible, Anglo-Saxon paganism, and manuscripts); b) interdisciplinary contexts (material culture, visualizing the material culture, and archetypal themes); and c) contemporary contexts (gender, psychology, models for understanding orality, and post-colonialism). The aim is to provide a good starting point for courses and individual classes that situate the poem in traditional contexts as well as in theories and approaches that have become buzzwords in the humanities.

Examples of the former include Jana K. Schulman's 'Teaching *Beowulf* in the Context of Old Norse' (pp. 105–113), which lists and summarizes Old Norse sagas with narrative patterns that are analogous with *Beowulf*. Another good example is Lawrence Besseman's '*Beowulf* and the Bible' (pp. 147–157), which gives a useful review of sections in *Beowulf* that support reading it as a Christian poem.

Its counterpart is, of course, Philip Purser's 'Heathenism in *Beowulf*' (pp. 159–68), which offers an overview of possible heathen concepts in *Beowulf*, ranging from boar-images on Geats' helmets as possible Freyr-figures (p. 160) to burial customs (pp. 160–164), finishing with a combined reading and description of a class assignment of Wealtheow as a Valkyrie-figure (pp. 164–168). John M. Hill's 'Gifts and Social Tension in *Beowulf*' (pp. 139–146) mainly focuses on literary readings, but will give the *Beowulf*-teacher useful reference points for discussing a central element in the numerous detailed descriptions of banquets and other social rituals in the poem.

Contemporary Contexts include Frantzen's chapter on gender, which was discussed above. In another very interesting chapter, 'Psychological Approaches to *Beowulf*' (pp. 215–222), James W. Earl casts his net wide in surveying various approaches touching *Beowulf* and the mind, from Aristotelian *catharsis* (p. 215) to Jung, Lacan and Kristeva (p. 216), and heroic duty (p. 215) to horror films (p. 217) and the theme of growing up that is prevalent in fantasy literature from *Peter Pan* to *Harry Potter*. In the final chapter of the book, Andrew James Johnston's 'postcolonial *Beowulf*' (pp. 231–240) takes a postcolonial approach to *Beowulf*, which may be surprising, as post-colonialism has usually been applied to the post-Norman conquest period of medieval Britain. The chapter is rather heavy on literary theory, and the author perhaps too eager to find postcolonial connections, including parallels between Beowulf's descent into the cave of Grendel's mother and Marlow's journey into the *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 236–237). However, it offers a useful summary of postcolonial theory as well as its foundations in the *Annales* tradition of French historiography and Marxist literary criticism. Like all chapters in the final subsection, Johnston's should be of use in certain course contexts.

Interestingly, chapters that discuss the manuscript and oral aspects of *Beowulf* are considered to be *Interdisciplinary contexts*. The study of oral-formulaic features of *Beowulf*, once both thriving and mainstream, is discussed in only one chapter in the present volume. Sheila J. Nayar '*Beowulf* and modes for understanding oral narratively' (pp. 223–230) starts by acknowledging that some scholars these days see *Beowulf's* orality as purely literary fiction and seeks to familiarize students, who are 'textual' and indeed, 'texting beings' (p. 223) with a cultural context in which orality played a greater role. Approaches recommended by her range from the game telephone (p. 224) to Benjamin Bagby DVDs (p. 227) and the two film adaptations not discussed by Acker and Harley (pp. 227–230).

What I found even more surprising to the point of being objectionable, as my background is in material philology, is that the chapter on manuscripts is included as Chapter 19 in *Interdisciplinary contexts* and not at the beginning in

Materials. This shows how much *Beowulf* scholarship tends to prioritize editorial text at the expense of the manuscript source.[7] To be fair, the editors duly state that they have replaced the term 'background', used in the 1984 volume, with 'context' precisely to avoid the impression that these chapters are of secondary importance, and there is an argument to be made that, for teachers, editions and translations are the main materials they work with. Nevertheless, I cannot help but comment that the only real primary source we have for the poem is the partly burned Cotton MS Vitellius A.XV, not a text prepared by a German philologist in the 20th century.

However, this is not to say that the chapters on material context are bad. On the contrary, people seeking to teach *Beowulf* from manuscript facsimiles or enhancing their teaching with images of Anglo-Saxon objects are well served by the collection. They include Mark Faulkner's 'Teaching *Beowulf* in its manuscript context' (pp. 169–175), which is another very practically focused chapter, describing how he has taught the material context of *Beowulf*. A second chapter that offers a good companion piece to Faulkner's is Maren Clegg Hyer's 'Material Culture and Teaching *Beowulf*' (pp. 177–184), which lists different artefacts and where images of them that can be used to teach *Beowulf* can be found. A third companion chapter in this series is Marijne Osborn's 'Visualizing the material culture of *Beowulf*' (pp. 185–193), which is a useful chapter that goes through parts of *Beowulf* with descriptions of objects and tells where to find good material to illustrate them.

Another minor criticism is that the focus of the volume is very strongly on American context. The editors begin their introduction '[t]ime has not diminished the importance of *Beowulf*, however cruel it has been to the teaching of Old English and other early medieval languages in American colleges and universities' (p. 1) without even noting teaching in Europe and elsewhere. This despite the fact that not all of the contributors are Americans, including scholars from universities in Jerusalem, Sheffield and Berlin.

These criticisms notwithstanding, one can say that the volume is a resounding success in fulfilling the two hopes that the editors set for it. The collection is a good and up-to-date handbook to different editions, translations and handbooks of *Beowulf* as well as film versions and the new media. It is also filled with good ideas for teaching *Beowulf*, which I intend to apply should I have the

---

[7] For a discussion of the way runes in the *Beowulf* manuscript are ignored by printed editions from Klaeber to *Electronic Beowulf* see Foys, Martin, and Whitney Anne Trettien, 'Vanishing Transliteracies in *Beowulf* and Samuel Pepys's Diary', in Orietta Da Rold and Elaine Treharne (eds), *Textual Cultures: Cultural Texts*, Boydell & Brewer: Rochester, 2010, 95–99.

good fortune to teach *Beowulf* and Old English literature again. The book is likely to remain an important part of my Old English instructor's bookshelf for many years to come and I can sincerely recommend it to anyone else who needs to prepare a class on *Beowulf*.

Alpo Honkapohja, PhD
English Department
University of Zurich
alpo.honkapohja[at]es.uzh.ch