



Review: R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*

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Source: *MoveableType*, Vol. 5, 'Mess' (2009)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.048

MoveableType is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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 **UCLPRESS**

REVIEW

R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, newly edited by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, offers a well-presented and highly scholarly edition of Klaeber's classic reference work, the third edition of which was described by Martin Lehnert in 1953 as the 'Beowulf-Bible of International Studies'. As Helen Damico's foreword notes, this timely fourth edition may be nominally attributed to Klaeber for good reason; not because the notes or commentary offered here substantially reproduce those found in the third, but because the clear aim of the editors throughout has been to produce a text which matches Klaeber's commitment to providing students of the poem with adequate resources for in-depth study. More than half a century has passed since the text and its supporting materials were last revised, and great a number of developments have been made in mainstream Old English studies which must be adequately represented if 'Klaeber's' *Beowulf* is to retain its justified position as the *lofgeornost* of scholarly editions. It is this daunting challenge to which the editors have risen, and done so with aplomb.

The presentation of the text itself largely follows Klaeber's lead, and is splendidly done, with the apparatus supplied providing a comprehensive account of both the manuscript and over thirty complete or partial previous editions. Generally speaking, most of the introductory material which takes up the two hundred or so pages preceding the poem proper is sound and informative. Sections summarizing the form and content of the manuscript, the language and poetic forms of *Beowulf*, and some trends in literary criticism, offer an excellent overview of some of the most significant issues surrounding the poem. The editors have also included studies briefly outlining general critical readings of the poem with reference to themes such as 'Monsters and Myth', 'Christian and Heroic Values', 'Structure and Unity', and 'Mood, Tone, and Style'. Given that two of the contributing editors to this volume were also responsible for helming the invaluable *Beowulf Handbook*, the range, depth, and clarity of these is not unexpected.

Of course, it is difficult to achieve a balance between all of these things likely to satisfy all readers, particularly when one begins to delve into the complexities of dating the poem, tackling the question of its origins, or divining those texts which may have influenced its composition. Materials offered in support of new editions of *Beowulf*, whether introductory, bibliographical, or otherwise, inevitably, if unintentionally, seem to be making a quiet case for something held somewhere just out of sight. This tendency does, at times, seem also to have affected this volume.

Omnia autem probate: quod bonum est, tenete, announces the introductory quote to the substantial commentary on the text. However well intentioned, it is a justifiable concern that taking this approach might lend undue gravity to certain voices. The section on the dating and origins of the poem, for example, is not wholly representative of recent developments in Beowulf scholarship. Equally, Beowulf enthusiasts and scholars may find important figures such as Chambers to be underrepresented. It is a shame to think that students of the poem may be steered away from certain treasures of Beowulfiana as a result of this. By the same token, apparent archaeological contexts for the poem presented in the commentary are sometimes introduced without due indication of the debates from which they emerge. *Omnia autem probate: quod bonum est, tenete*, by all means, but also *attendite a falsis prophetis*. A list of works cited is provided to conclude the volume, in lieu of a complete bibliography, for reasons which are evident from its length alone. The editors are good enough to direct the reader to Greenfield and Robinson's 1980 bibliography, and the annual bibliographies of ASE and the OEN which cover the ground from 1972 onwards.

In summary then, it is worth noting that this volume is clearly better suited to those approaching the poem at graduate level and above rather than those encountering the poem for the first, or even tenth time. But it is also worth noting, in the same breath, that it does not pretend to imitate the work of Mitchell and Robinson, or George Jack. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles' Beowulf more than adequately fulfills the need for a new standard scholarly edition of the poem in the twenty-first century, and may justifiably bear the name of Klaeber because of the editors' clear commitment to follow Klaeber's approach as both an editor and commentator.

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Michael Bintley wrote his PhD on 'Trees and Woodland in Anglo-Saxon Culture' in the English and Archaeology departments at UCL. His current research interests include representations of urbanism and landscape in early Medieval literature.