

Approaches to Teaching *Beowulf*

Edited by Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.,
and Robert F. Yeager

ofc scyld scefinz sceape
þreatum monezū mæzþum meodo setla
of teah ezsode eorl syððan ærfezt pear
fea sceafz funden he þæs fprofre zeba
peox under polcnum peorð myndum þah
oð þ him æzhpyle þara ymb sitten dra
ofer hron raðe hyran scolde zomban
zyldan þpæs zod cyninz.

Approaches to Teaching

Beowulf

Edited by

Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.

and

Robert F. Yeager

THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION
OF AMERICA 1984

© 1984 by The Modern Language Association of America
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Approaches to teaching Beowulf.

(Approaches to teaching masterpieces of world literature ; 4)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Beowulf—Study and teaching. 2. Anglo-Saxon literature—Study and teaching.

I. Bessinger, Jess B. II. Yeager, Robert F. III. Series.

PR1585.A66 1984 829'.3 83-22124

ISBN 0-87352-481-0

ISBN 0-87352-482-9 (pbk.)

Cover illustration in paperback edition: portion of *Beowulf* manuscript transcribed
by Ellen F. Higgins

Third printing 1993

Published by The Modern Language Association of America
10 Astor Place, New York, New York, 10003-6981

PREFACE TO THE SERIES

In his thoughtful and sensitive book *The Art of Teaching* (1950), Gilbert Highet wrote, “Bad teaching wastes a great deal of effort, and spoils many lives which might have been full of energy and happiness.” All too many teachers have failed in their work, Highet argued, simply “because they have not thought about it.” We hope that the Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature series, sponsored by the Modern Language Association’s Committee on Teaching and Related Professional Activities, will not only improve the craft—as well as the art—of teaching but also encourage serious and continuing discussion of the aims and methods of our teaching.

The principal objective of the series is to collect within each volume a number of points of view on teaching a particular work of world literature that is widely taught at the undergraduate level. The preparation of each volume begins with a survey of instructors who have considerable experience in teaching the work, thus enabling us to include in the volume the philosophies and approaches, thoughts and methods of scores of experienced teachers. The result is a source book of material, information, and ideas on teaching the work to undergraduates.

This series is intended to serve nonspecialists as well as specialists, inexperienced as well as experienced teachers, graduate students who wish to learn effective ways of teaching as well as senior professors who wish to compare their own approaches with the approaches of colleagues in other schools. Of course, no volume in the series can ever substitute for erudition, intelligence, creativity, and sensitivity in teaching. We hope merely that each book will point readers in useful directions; at most each will offer only a first step in the long journey to successful teaching.

In a time that increasingly demands a rededication to undergraduate teaching of the humanities and to the idea of a liberal education, it may well be that our sometimes divided and fragmented profession will rediscover a sense of purpose, unity, and community in its concern for and commitment to teaching. We hope that the Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature series will serve in some small way to refocus attention on the importance of teaching and to improve undergraduate instruction. We may perhaps adopt as keynote for the series Alfred North Whitehead’s observation in *The Aims of Education* (1929) that a liberal education “proceeds by imparting a knowledge of the masterpieces of thought, of imaginative literature, and of art.”

Joseph Gibaldi
Series Editor

PREFACE TO THE VOLUME

We here boldly paraphrase the first paragraph of Joseph Gibaldi's preface in the first volume of the Modern Language Association's Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature series, which was devoted to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the work of "the first great English poet." We present here a companion volume on a somewhat earlier great English poem.

Because of a notable decline in the study of language and history in North America, and indeed in England and in English-speaking enclaves abroad, perhaps no other major poem in the English language is so jeopardized in the universities. Heroically, it seems to be surviving. While the study of *Beowulf* declines in the universities, it flourishes in other places—in small liberal arts colleges, in community colleges, in secondary schools. *Beowulf* is too sophisticated a primitive hero to indulge in folkish or mythic shape shifting, but the teaching of the poem about him has done something of the sort. Former great scholar-teachers might feel at home, we may hope, in some graduate seminars or advanced Old English classrooms today; but they would scarcely be able to credit what is happening to their poem, or to pedagogical approaches to it, in formerly less privileged places.

Like the other volumes in the series, this book is concerned chiefly with teaching at the undergraduate level. We offer it, however, to all teachers of *Beowulf*, among whom we trust will be found many instructors of a traditional *Beowulf* course in a traditional Old English course sequence. Indeed, some such survivors of a venerable tradition have contributed essays to this volume. We hope then that both specialists and neophyte teachers, and perhaps some advanced students, will find matter to interest and assist them.

Our book begins with an introduction by the editors on the current phenomena associated with the study of *Beowulf*, and not just in the classroom or on the North American continent. The main body of the work is divided into sections entitled "Materials" and "Approaches." The editorial "Instructor's Library" includes a special survey of translations of *Beowulf* by Douglas D. Short, a section clearly aimed at undergraduate teachers and their students.

In our introduction we have drawn also on the spectrum of instructors' opinions about translations and other matters. The "Materials" section, dealing with such questions as choice of editions and recommended research and teaching tools, was formally the editors' responsibility, but it is based on information provided to us by the *Beowulfians* who took part in the survey that initiated the preparation of this volume. There were about one hundred

of them, from North America, England, continental Europe, Hawaii, and Japan. We salute them here.

From these generous respondents the editors chose about twenty-five teachers of *Beowulf* for a series of clustered essays discussing approaches to the poem at various levels—whether adapted to graduate, undergraduate, or mixed classes, whether teaching primarily in Old English or in translation. These essays, and our own, suggest different approaches to teaching the poem, and we hope the variety makes clear our belief that today there can be no possible “best” approach to *Beowulf*.

An appendix of participants in our survey, a list of works cited throughout the volume, a discography, and an index complete the work.

We have thanked the respondents to our survey, the people who made the book possible. But we owe special thanks also to the general editor of the series, Joseph Gibaldi, and to his staff at the Modern Language Association for their auspices and for their timely, thoughtful, practical assistance. We also thank the members of the association’s Committee on Teaching and Related Professional Activities for their endorsement of our contribution to the *Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature* series. We are especially grateful to Thomas J. Garbáty and Stanley B. Greenfield, whose careful readings of the entire manuscript were both friendly and rigorous; their independent and overlapping corrections and suggestions were very welcome. Our gratitude also goes to Ellen F. Higgins for allowing us to use her transcription of a portion of the *Beowulf* manuscript as a cover illustration for the paperback edition.

Our volume is a joint effort throughout, so we jointly thank Leda Neale and Patricia Kaplan and her family for warmly appreciated practical assistance and for the hospitality that made available to us a summertime Anglo-Saxon factory on the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound.

JBB
RFY

INTRODUCTION: AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY ON THE TEACHING OF *BEOWULF*

This volume grew out of a long-standing interest among members of the Old English Group of the MLA. About sixteen years ago, the *Old English Newsletter* was founded in order to publish "A Survey of Old English Teaching in America in 1966," by Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., and Fred C. Robinson, in its first number. More than a decade later, Robert F. Yeager published a new assessment in the same journal: "Some Turning Points in the History of Teaching Old English in America." The general editor of the MLA's Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature series then kindly invited us to prepare a volume on *Beowulf*, and with his help we drew up and distributed as widely as possible a questionnaire for teachers of the poem at all levels and in many kinds of educational institutions. We planned to use the responses to develop a collection of essays by invited contributors, to which we would add introductory matter in the format of the series.

In the spring and summer of 1982, when the digesting of our questionnaire materials and the editing of our contributors' essays were drawing to a close, it sometimes seemed to us that, however much the study of *Beowulf* might be flourishing in the classrooms of the world, there was a cult of *Beowulf* that had somehow escaped from the classroom or private study and emerged into the public consciousness. An animated musical film from Australia called *Grendel Grendel Grendel*, with the title role spoken by Peter Ustinov, was seen briefly in New York City and some other centers. The acknowledged basis for the film was John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971), but there was something of the comic-book cartoon in the film also, a reminder of the thematically and artistically ambitious (and incongruous) *Beowulf* comics of a decade earlier. Early risers in Manhattan were invited by the *Village Voice* (3 Aug. 1982) to 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. free performances of *Beowulf* in Central Park's East Meadow, "a ritual-ceremonial experience in six movements based on the medieval epic . . . a vision-quest or journey to attain consciousness." In London the *Observer* (1 Aug. 1982) reviewed a one-man performance of "an expurgated *Beowulf*" at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, by Julian Glover, who later took his show to the Edinburgh Festival. During the

summer recess, at any rate, it seemed that *Beowulf* was to be found almost everywhere in the world but in the usual English department classroom.

In the classroom, however, if our questionnaires are true indicators, the poem is flourishing as perhaps never before—see Joseph F. Tuso's chapter for some surprising figures. It flourishes, moreover, increasingly in translated form, before younger audiences than was customary a few decades ago, and often in novel company with other works of imagination and science.

After World War II, *Beowulf* was widely taught in translation from survey-course anthologies and studied in Old English graduate courses or seminars. The work was either read mainly for philology or else related diachronically, if in few other ways, to the history of English literature. It was the staple of the philological requirement in many graduate schools of English that were shortly to reconstitute the requirement in a linguistics category, then restrict it more narrowly to a history of the English language option, then eliminate the requirement altogether, sometimes (but not always) banishing *Beowulf* from the curriculum altogether. Nowadays *Beowulf* is still studied in Old English, but by no means so frequently as before and certainly not as an unquestioned and universal graduate English requirement. It is studied today by proportionately more undergraduates than ever before, often in classes of mixed graduates and undergraduates. It is read in various good verse or prose translations (see the chapter by Douglas D. Short) in high schools and preparatory schools, at community colleges, in undergraduate courses in a wide distribution of liberal arts institutions, and, to be sure, in those graduate schools that can still afford to cater to a taste or a need for the Dark Ages in an educational market increasingly and restrictively competitive, egalitarian, technocratic, professional, popular, and geared to preparation in law, medicine, and business.

If a musical performance of *Beowulf* as a consciousness-raising medium at dawn in Central Park is no longer an anomaly, neither is the teaching of the poem as an ancestor or analogue to a futuristic motion picture like *Star Wars*. "After all," an enthusiastic and outstandingly successful young teacher writes on his questionnaire, "Darth Vader's helmet looks like the Sutton Hoo helmet." (Darth Vader is the intergalactic villain in *Star Wars*.) "So I show them the Sutton Hoo helmet and we talk about *Star Wars* and *Beowulf*."

The merely terrestrial *Beowulf* of old is now taught in bracing and eclectic company. We asked our correspondents, "If you compare *Beowulf* with other works of literature, religion, and history, indicate which and for what purpose." The replies include *The Tain*, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Heliand*, *The Song of Roland*, *The Nibelungenlied*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Saga of Grettir* and *Njal's Saga*, John Gardner's *Grendel*, Old Testament heroic sagas and poems, space movies, Homer and Vergil, *Billy Budd*, *Lord Jim*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. The "purpose" inquired about is

always pedagogical and markedly subjective. Most respondents discuss undergraduate students and do not think much about philology, but those who answered another question about teaching *Beowulf* in translation regularly said they take care to introduce when they can some elements of the original Old English: "I show them and read them short illustrative passages"; "I write the first three lines of the poem on the board and read them"; "I mention Old English words and discuss them, like *wyrd* and *scop*, which just mean "fate" and "poet" but in very special senses." This is minimalist philology but good teaching if a class has one hour per term for *Beowulf*.

When we asked which background and supplementary materials were used, we received in answer a conspectus of the most famous names and titles in our field, works by Chambers, Sisam, Whitelock, Klaeber, and many others, who are cataloged in other pages of the present volume. Along with these are mentioned the *Germania* of Tacitus, Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind*, Ker's *Catalogue of Manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon* or Ogilvy's *Books Known to Anglo-Latin Writers from Aldhelm to Alcuin* (670–804), Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, Havelock's *A Preface to Plato*, Beryl Rowland's *Medieval Women's Guide to Health: The First English Gynecological Handbook*, and many others—a list too various to categorize but indicative of a new pluralism in the *Beowulf* profession.

More prosaically, we asked our friends and colleagues, "If you teach other Old English works in conjunction with *Beowulf*, state which and how much each enhances understanding of *Beowulf*." We are directed, emphatically and repeatedly, to the so-called elegies, especially *Deor*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife's Lament*; *The Battle of Maldon*; *The Dream of the Rood*; the story of Caedmon and his *Hymn*; and the *Maxims*. Interestingly, our stipulation about the enhancement of understanding was seldom replied to, perhaps because the answer is obvious. It is clear, rather, that *Beowulf* instructors see Old English literature as an organon, an interrelated inventory, and they habitually teach it that way to the full stretch of their abilities and opportunities.

Readers may be interested in a short review of some of the remaining items on our preliminary questionnaire. We received about one hundred responses from teachers of *Beowulf*, whether in Old English or in translation, at all levels. We learned that *Beowulf* is taught to:

(a) graduate students	approximately	15%
(b) undergraduate English majors	approximately	30%
(c) undergraduate nonmajors	approximately	45%
(d) mixed graduates and undergraduates	approximately	10%

It seems to us that category (c) is the most remarkable and prophetic.

Major Questions

1. "If you teach *Beowulf* in Old English, which edition(s) do you use and why?" The majority recommend Klaeber for quality of edition and apparatus, especially the magnificent glossary, and for availability. It is described as "the most for the money" and "the most complete even though not up-to-date." A considerable minority prefer Wrenn-Bolton for quality of edition, for less formidable and more accessible apparatus than Klaeber's, and for the welcome updating of the critical introduction. Another considerable minority favor Chickering for economy and for the facing-page translation, as well as for the overall excellence of a well-rounded presentation of the poem.

2. "If you teach *Beowulf* in a Modern English translation, indicate which you use and why." (The reader should also consult Douglas D. Short's chapter, for it was prepared independently of our collation of questionnaires.) The order of preference—probably not too significant in so small a sample but not without interest—is Donaldson by a large measure, followed by Raffel, Chickering, Kennedy, Alfred, Clark Hall, and Heatt. (Greenfield's translation was not yet available at the time of our survey.) The responses to this question are notably emotional or else typically resigned: "Donaldson's is always reliably close to the original; its prose is conservative, so that one must or can *imagine* the poetry; it is surpassingly available, in three different formats." "Raffel's is simply splendid but too free." "Alfred's is fine, noble, stirring."

3. "What are your views on the teaching of *Beowulf* in a modern translation?" The views expressed here are moderate, grateful, or indignant, in about equal measure. One instructor declares that "The modern translations I have seen would never be read by someone not compelled to read them. They are difficult to teach because not worth teaching on their own merits. It's a delight to teach the poem in Old English. But when the poem must be taught in just one hour or not at all, one is forced to translations." Another writes: "This seems to me to be not a real issue, as the choice between teaching Chaucer in Middle English or in a modernized version is. Teaching *Beowulf* in Modern English is the only way most of us are ever going to be able to teach it. There are excellent translations, and it is an easy compromise. I almost *prefer* teaching a translation, so that the students can avoid the distraction of translating."

4. "If you use an anthology, which do you use?" The order of preference here is Norton, Tuso, Oxford.

The main text of this volume covers the remaining questions, except for one that asked for "approximately five to ten essential background, critical, or reference works with which you believe instructors of *Beowulf* should be

familiar.” We need not tally the responses here, because they make up the critical mass of well-known and permanently valuable work on *Beowulf*, as outlined in the “Instructor’s Library” chapter. What deserves notice here is that, on the basis of our samplings, it would appear that people teaching *Beowulf* nowadays, and in particular those teaching the poem in translation primarily to undergraduates, are remarkably well-informed about *Beowulf* scholarship and evidently well-equipped with teaching materials.

CONTENTS

Preface to the Series	ix
Preface to the Volume	xi
Introduction: An International Survey on the Teaching of <i>Beowulf</i>	xiii
 PART ONE: MATERIALS <i>Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., and Robert F. Yeager</i>	
Editions	3
<i>Douglas D. Short</i> , Translations of <i>Beowulf</i>	7
Aids to Teaching	14
The Instructor's Library	17
Introduction	17
Reference Works	18
Background Studies	21
Critical and Stylistic Studies	24
Manuscript Studies and Facsimiles	28
 PART TWO: APPROACHES	
<i>Beowulf</i> Courses Today	
<i>Joseph F. Tusso</i> , The State of the Art: A Survey	33
Teaching <i>Beowulf</i> in Old English to Undergraduates	
<i>Howell Chickering</i>	40
<i>Elizabeth Greene</i>	45
<i>George Clark</i>	47
<i>Paul B. Taylor</i>	49
<i>Robert F. Yeager</i>	52

Teaching *Beowulf* in Translation to Undergraduates

<i>Elaine Tuttle Hansen</i>	57
<i>Bernice W. Kliman</i>	61
<i>Edward J. Rielly</i>	65
<i>Diana M. DeLuca</i>	68

Teaching *Beowulf* in Old English to Mixed Undergraduate and Graduate Classes

<i>Michael D. Cherniss</i>	71
<i>Mary Elizabeth Meek</i>	75
<i>Alain Renoir</i>	79
<i>Victor L. Strite</i>	83

Teaching *Beowulf* in Old English to Graduate Students

<i>Stanley J. Kahrl</i>	86
<i>John C. McGalliard</i>	90
<i>Marijane Osborn</i>	97
<i>Harry Jay Solo</i>	103

Teaching the Backgrounds

<i>Fred C. Robinson</i> , History, Religion, Culture	107
<i>Constance B. Heatt</i> , Parallels, Useful Analogues, and Elusive Sources	123
<i>John Miles Foley</i> , <i>Beowulf</i> : Oral Tradition behind the Manuscript	130

Special Approaches

<i>Myra Berman</i> , The New Rhetoric: Writing as an Instrument for Teaching <i>Beowulf</i>	139
<i>Donald K. Fry</i> , Visual Materials for Teaching <i>Beowulf</i>	144
<i>Alexandra Hennessey Olsen</i> , Women in <i>Beowulf</i>	150
<i>John D. Niles</i> , Teaching <i>Beowulf</i> as Performance	157
<i>Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.</i> , Forgeries and Facsimiles: Paleography without Tears	161
<i>Stephen A. Barney</i> , The Words	166
<i>Thomas Cable</i> , Old English Prosody	173

Participants in Survey of <i>Beowulf</i> Instructors	179
Works Cited	183
Discography	207
Index	209

Part One

MATERIALS

EDITIONS

Selecting a text to use in the classroom poses several choices for the teacher of *Beowulf*. Most basic of these is whether the poem will be taught in Old English or in translation. Because, for one reason or another, most instructors elect translations, Douglas D. Short provides extensive discussion of those available in “Translations of *Beowulf*.” In that chapter, too, he covers dual-language editions, with Old and Modern English versions on facing pages, and translations in anthologies. Thus, our present concern is exclusively with Old English texts. While we supply no recommendations here as to the relative merits of particular editions over others, we include synopses of comments taken from the questionnaires returned by colleagues who have used or are currently using these texts. Such comments, we hope, will be valuable to instructors seeking a *Beowulf* edition suited to their individual needs. Full bibliographical data are provided in the Works Cited at the end of this volume.

Inarguably, the most complete edition of *Beowulf* in Old English is that of Frederick Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. It is the text generally cited in scholarly studies of *Beowulf* and it is frequently used in graduate and undergraduate classes around the world. Klaeber’s *Beowulf* is acclaimed because, in addition to a sound text, it contains extensive support material vital for a thorough study of the poem. Indeed, such material makes up the bulk of the book: of 471 numbered pages, only 120 are *Beowulf* text. The remainder are explanatory notes; the important Finnsburg fragment (with a valuable introduction, notes, and bibliography for it); four appendixes covering (1) analogues and parallel passages drawn from Anglo-Saxon genealogies, Scandinavian documents, and Roman, Frankish, and Gothic historians; (2) aspects of Old Germanic life touched on in *Beowulf*, indexed according to line number and with a full listing of synonymous terms; (3) textual criticism, citing anomalous forms and metrical incongruities; (4) the text of *Waldere*, *Deor*, and selections from *Widsith* and the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*; glossaries of words and proper names; and two supplements, each updating the notes, glossaries, and bibliographies of previous editions. There are also 187 pages of introduction, containing a bibliography, a table of abbreviations, general remarks, and eight black-and-white plates illustrating two pages from the Cotton Vitellius A. XV manuscript, objects and scenes from pre-Conquest life, and the geography of *Beowulf*, as well as specific discussions of eight important aspects of the poem: (1) “Argument of the Poem”; (2) “The Fabulous or Supernatural Elements”; (3) “The Historical Elements”; (4) “The Christian Coloring”; (5) “Structure of the Poem”;