16 April 2021

Week 11: The Swedish Wars

Our discussions this week concerned James Earl, "The Swedish Wars in *Beowulf*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114.1 (2015): 32–60. It is in my opinion one of the two best articles written on *Beowulf*—the first is Tolkien's "The Monsters and the Critics." Why?

First, it is written in **plain English**. Not a lot of jargon. It shows us that one can write intelligently about literature using simple words and uncomplicated syntax.

Second, Earl has a **terrific question**. It is an Isaac-Newton-type question. For millennia, people watched apples fall from trees. When asked, "Why does an apple fall?" most people don't stop to think. Except Newton did stop to think, and he developed a theory of gravity. Most readers of *Beowulf* don't stop and ask:

1) what happened during the Swedish wars and
2) why does the poet make it so difficult to understand?

And third, Earl is interested in the **phenomenology of reading**. This is a jargon-phrase that compresses a longer thought: there is an *effect on a reader* that a text makes *moment-by-moment* as the reader takes it in. Reading is a time-based art, like music. You process a symphony a moment at a time. And you process a story a moment at a time. Earl says that we "experience the poem as it opens up before us." And paying close attention to that experience "keeps us from escaping too quickly into generalities." An example of escaping into generalities would be to note that both Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* are about fishing.

PART I: THE SWEDISH WARS

Earl's first question is, What happened during the Swedish Wars? The Swedish Wars form the background of *Beowulf*. (It is like the Vietnam War for Tim O'Brien, or the Civil War for *Gone with the Wind*.) Beowulf himself fought in these wars. He may or may not have killed the Swedish king, to whom he may or may not be related. Earl notes that trying to figure out what exactly happened during the Swedish Wars is not a literary problem. It is a historical one. Earl lists 12 questions that critics and historians have debated:

1. Who started the war? The Swedes (as Beowulf claims at l. 2475) or the Geats (as the Messenger claims at l. 2924)?
2. Was Beowulf at the battle of Raven's Wood?
3. How old was Hygelac at Raven's Wood? Was he a boy or a father?
4. Which Swedish king came first, Onela or Ohtere?
5. Why praise Onela ("þæt wæs god cyning" l. 2390), an enemy of Beowulf?

6. Was Beowulf the regent for Hygelac's son Heardred?
7. Was Beowulf involved in the battle in which Heardred died?
8. What does it mean that "Onela let Beowulf hold the throne"?
9. Who killed Onela?
10. Was Weohstan a Geat or a Swede?
11. Is Beowulf a Geat or a Swede?
12. Who is King of Sweden at Beowulf's death?

Imagine an epic poem that takes place during the American Civil War. You don't know which side the hero is on. You hear about the hero helping the Union and the Confederacy. You don't know if he helped to kill President Lincoln or not. And the poet isn't telling.

PART II: PRESENTATION OF THE WARS

Earl's second question is, Why did the poet present the wars in such a confusing way? It would have been easy enough to insert a lay about the wars, as the poet inserted the Lay of Finnsburg. There are five passages that discuss the wars directly. Earl lists them and translates them for you (p. 35 and Appendix I). He gives a summary of events on p. 36:

> When Hreþel dies and Hæðcyn becomes king of the Geats, Ohthere and Onela, sons of the Swedish king Ongenþeow, attack Geatland at Hreosna Hill. There is a great back-and-forth battle at Ravens' Wood, in Sweden. Ongenþeow rescues his wife and Hæðcyn is killed; but the next day Hygelac arrives; his thegn Eofor kills Ongenþeow, for which Hygelac gives him his daughter. Later, when Hygelac dies, Beowulf declines the throne, and Hygelac's son Heardred becomes king. Heardred aids Eanmund and Eadgils, the sons of Ohthere, in rebellion against their uncle Onela, the Swedish king. Onela attacks Geatland and kills Heardred, and his thegn Weohstan kills Eanmund; he puts Beowulf on the Geatish throne, and departs. Later Beowulf aids Eadgils; together they attack Sweden and kill Onela. Fifty years later Weohstan's son Wiglaf comes to Beowulf's aid against the dragon; he wields Eanmund's sword, which Onela gave to Weohstan.

But the poet isn't as clear as Earl. Instead, the poet presents the events out of order, repeating some. That summary appears on page 37:

> (I) After Hygelac died, the Swedes killed Heardred, and Beowulf became king. (II) The son of Hygelac supported the sons of Ohthere; so the son of Ongenþeow killed him and made Beowulf king; he then supported Ohthere's son Eadgils and killed the king. (III) After Hreþel died, Ongenþeow's sons attacked the Geats at Hreosna Hill; Hæðcyn was killed, but his kinsman avenged him, and Eofor killed Ongenþeow. (IV) Weohstan's son Wiglaf carries the sword of Ohthere's son Eanmund, whom Weohstan killed; Onela gave him the sword for killing his nephew, which he passed to his son. (V) Ongenþeow killed Hæðcyn at Ravens' Wood; Ohthere's father rescued Onela's and Ohthere's mother and trapped the Geats overnight, but fled when Hygelac arrived. He was wounded by Wulf and killed by Eofor. Hygelac rewarded them, giving Eofor his daughter.

So, why present the wars in **fragments** that are out of order? What might motivate the poet to do so?

Earl finds that critics offer six general answers.

1. **Oral Tradition**. The audience knew the story already, so why repeat it.
2. **New Critical Aesthetics**. There is a larger, artistic purpose to the confusion.
3. **Interlace Structure**. This is how a linear narrative is turned into the circular, interweaving style of interlace (see Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*")

4. **Historical Vision**. The technique represents "a collapse of sequential time into cyclical time" (Chick Chickering).
5. **Narrative Technique**. The themes found in events of the war relate to elements in the narrative of *Beowulf*. "The reader is lost in the maze of history that finally seems to consume even the Geats themselves," p. 55.)
6. **Historical Fiction**. Putting a fictional character into history distorts history.

The confusion caused by the poet's complicated presentation of the Swedish Wars is a mystery that people can't resist trying to solve. But, says Earl, there is no solution!

In his final paragraph, Earl offers the opinion that he prefers the poem's "reversed tendencies, unprecedented surprises, and constantly disorienting shifts in the terms of the story" (p. 56). He approvingly cites Craig Davis of Smith College:

> The poet deliberately ambiguates the rights and wrongs of the Geatish-Swedish feud through multiple moral equivalencies: faults on both sides, we are made to realize. He de-moralizes our attitude toward the doomed Geats as he forces us to contemplate, through the lament of the Geatish woman by Beowulf's pyre, what is in store for them now: invasion, slaughter, terror, humiliation, captivity—death as a nation. . . . This is what happens to all peoples eventually, the poet implies, to all *people*. This is just the way things always turn out in the traditional plot of history." ("Theories of History in Traditional Plots.")

By describing the facts *as we experience them* in the poem, Earl illustrates a remarkably unfamiliar view of history that the *Beowulf*-poet had. And thus, we may see how skewed is our own understanding of history: a linear set of events with beginnings, middles, and ends generated by unmixed motives and connected together rationally and organically. Sounds more like a chemical equation than real life!

In *Beowulf* we inhabit a world of uncertain facts, mixed motives, greed, half-lies, and a selfish longing for fame. To those of its readers who were expected to become judges and fair-minded nobility, what better school could there be for training the mind?