

ON THE NON-INTEGRITY OF *BEOWULF*

My topic is an old and recurring one that has been investigated in a number of ingenious ways and will, I suspect, crop up again about once every generation. It concerns the unity of *Beowulf*: whether a single author conceived and composed it as one poem, or whether it is composite, formed of two or three or four more parts that were stitched together by creative scribes or bards or literate poets. It poses more than a question of formal scholarship, however, because it cuts to the heart of critical assumptions about Old English poetry and the purpose of literary study. While I do not intend to address these larger questions directly in this paper, it is helpful to keep them in mind to prevent us from dismissing earlier scholarship as naively misinformed and from being too self-congratulatory about our own enlightened goals. After all, our assumptions today, which place a premium on the integrity of the poem, may prove wrong.

Beowulf's integrity has not always been so highly prized. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century German studies were under the influence of classical scholarship in two crucial ways: classical scholars had had great success in using philology to detect different authorial styles in classical and biblical texts, and the classical ideal of *integritas* was the model when *Beowulf* came under the scrutiny of formal criticism. *Beowulf* failed to meet this classical ideal to such an extent that its lack of unity was assumed from the start. Thus one of the first and most influential dissectors of *Beowulf*, Carl Müllenhoff, at the beginning of his long article “Die innere Geschichte des

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Beowulfs” can assert, “There is no shortage of editions and translations of *Beowulf*. But the question of the means of its origin and composition as a poem... has hardly been touched upon. It has long occupied me.”¹ He goes on, in a rather personal way, to tell how this work has occupied him for twenty years, how he has repeated the investigation seven times down to the last detail, and concludes “I now have no further results to show and submit them here.” With this introduction he proceeds to divide the poem: “It is simple enough.”² The first 193 lines are a prologue outlining the succession of Danish kings and the building of Heorot. The rest of the poem could be divided into four parts: 194-836, concerning Beowulf’s homecoming; and 2200-3182, Beowulf’s fight with the dragon and death. The first and the last of these (the fight with Grendel and the fight with the dragon) had an earlier history as old lays. To the first of them a continuator added the story of the fight with Grendel’s mother. Then another continuation, Beowulf’s homecoming, was added to complete the story, and this author (known as Interpolator A) also added some passages to the earlier parts. A second interpolator (B) combined the first three parts with another old lay, the dragon episode, “often introducing theologizing and most of the rather inferior passages.”³ The rest of Müllenhoff’s article consists of some 50 pages giving a passage by passage stylistic analysis of the poem’s content: this line is old, this one is an interpolation.

Müllenhoff’s authority and the thoroughness of his scrutiny of the poem was enormously influential. His fourfold division was followed by other important scholars such as Ten Brink (1888)⁴ and Schücking

¹.- *Zeitschrift für deutsche Altertum* 14 (1869): 193

².- p. 194.

³.- p. 195.

⁴.- *Beowulf: Untersuchungen, Quellen und Forschungen* 62 (Straßburg, 1888).

(1905),¹ each of whom modified and refined the basic theory. In 1921 R. W. Chambers attacked the basis of the dissecting theories on two grounds: and second, “the minute scrutiny to which the poem has been subjected in matters of syntax, metre, dialect and tradition has failed to show any difference between the parts attributed to the different authors, such as we must certainly have expected to find, had the theories of the “dissecting school” been correct.”² It is possible to imagine adherents of the “dissecting school” responding that that is precisely what they had demonstrated, and it was in the spirit of such a response that Walter Berendsohn published *Zur Vorgeschichte des “Beowulf,”* in 1935.³

In a nutshell Chamber’s opinion was that the dissectors may be right, but have not proven their case, and until they prove their case it is best to assume the unity of *Beowulf*. “It is now admitted that the ways of Old English narrative were not necessarily our ways and that we must not postulate, because our poem falls into two somewhat clumsily connected sections, that therefore it is compounded out of two originally distinct lays.”⁴ Fifteen years later this opinion was supported and popularized by J. R. R. Tolkien in his famous lecture “*Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics.*” In it he refutes the assumption that the two main parts of the poem cannot be part of a unified whole. “[*Beowulf*] is essentially a balance, an opposition between ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an

¹.- *Beowulfs Rückkehr: Eine kritische Studie*, Studien zur englischen Philologie 21 (Halle, 1905).

².- *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the stories of Offa and Finn*, 3rd ed. with a supplement by C.L. Wrenn (Cambridge, 1959), 114-15.

³.- *Zur Vorgeschichte des “Beowulf,”* mit einem Vorwort von Otto Jespersen (Copenhagen, 1935).

⁴.- p. 117.

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elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and length: *A* from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines; *B* from 2200 to 3182 (the end) This simple and *static* structure, solid and strong, is in each part much diversified, and capable of enduring this treatment We have none the less in *Beowulf* a method and structure that within the limits of the verse-kind approaches rather to sculpture or painting. It is a composition not a tune ... No terms borrowed from Greek or Latin literature exactly fit: there is no reason why they should.”¹ Tolkien’s opposition between Greek and Latin standards exemplified by *Beowulf* lies at the heart of the contrast he makes. Against the classical unities of time, place and character he sets pairs of oppositions and balances. He articulates an aesthetic that can accommodate what classically trained sensibilities perceive as the disunities of *Beowulf*. Chambers and Tolkien laid the groundwork, the one philological the other aesthetic, for the kind of literary interpretation that, for its application, assumes the unity of the poem, and this kind of interpretation has flourished since 1936.

But Chambers and Tolkien did not prove the unity of the poem as much they showed its plausibility. Anglo-Saxonists, moreover, have long been aware of the extent of scribal tampering with poems in manuscript (seen in a few poems that survive more than one copy) and clear instances of composite poems, such as *Genesis*, the *Christ* poems, and the paired *Guthlac* poems. There are also a number of instances where we are not sure where one poem in manuscript ends and the next one begins. In other words, there are still grounds, if one seeks to find them, to suspect the unity of *Beowulf*.

¹.- *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): 29-33. The influence of Tolkien’s lecture is discussed by Wrenn in his supplement to Chambers, pp. 531-536.

Francis P. Magoun, Jr. made the next notable effort to demonstrate the composite origin of *Beowulf* in an article which takes up a number of details in lines 2009-2176, the transitional passage from the first half of *Beowulf* (A) to the second (B).¹ The passage consists primarily of Beowulf's speech, in response to Hygelac, about his exploits in Denmark, and it contains much recapitulatory matter. Many of the details as Beowulf relates them do not fit the earlier narrative. On the basis of these discrepancies, and on the basis of his knowledge of folk tales and theories of oral composition, Magoun argued that A', the transitional passage, was composed by an "anthologizer [who] had presumably to some extent mastered the technique of oral singing and hence was able to compose authentically in his own words neatly soldered joints."² This anthologizer knew a variant of the Beowulf story and added it to a speech by Beowulf near the end of the poem that is now the first 2009 lines of *Beowulf* (making it some 140 lines longer), and he also added the details of Beowulf's gifts of treasures and horses to Hygelac. In a later essay, Magoun elaborated his argument of the composite origin with a similar analysis of the second half of the poem, *Beowulf B*.³

Arthur G. Brodeur mounted a spirited attack against Magoun, refuting in a point by point analysis much of the argument.⁴ But aside from instances where he shows Magoun misunderstood the text, Brodeur argues, essentially, that the discrepancies of *Beowulf A'* do

¹.- "Beowulf A': A Folk Variant," *Arv* 14 (1958): 95-101.

².- p. 101.

³.- "Beowulf B: A Folk-Poem on Beowulf's Death," in *Early English and Norse Studies: Essays Presented to Hugh Smith on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. A. Brown and P. Foote (London, 1963), 127-140.

⁴.- "Beowulf: One Poem or Three?" *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies, Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick, N. J., 1970), 3-26.

not necessarily lead to a conclusion of separate authorship if the discrepancies are interpreted correctly --that is, as parts of an integral poem. For example, in *Beowulf A*, "the poet placed Hrothgar's monologue after the death of Grendel's dam; but in his report to Hygelac [A'], Beowulf places it at the feast following the defeat of Grendel." Where this inconsistency confirms Magoun's assumption of different authors and folk-variants, to Brodeur it is "the kind of lapse of memory much more likely to be made by a single poet working with complex material, and faced with the necessity of retelling, in drastically condensed form, what he had earlier told at great length ..."¹ The most telling point here is that beginning with different assumptions about the process of composition, Magoun and Brodeur use precisely the same evidence to come to opposite conclusions. Most Anglo-Saxonists have accepted Brodeur's argument, but it raises questions of how much of our willingness to accept it depends on our predisposition to accept the unity of the poem. Conceiving it as unity immediately confers advantages for some kinds of criticism. It makes it easier to speak of authorial intention, for example, or the attitude of the Christian author to the pagan past. Complications can multiply if there is more than one intention in forming the poem or more than one attitude toward the past, especially if it is not clear which author wrote what when.

Since Brodeur, the question of unity had been dormant, but it has not been laid to rest, as recent studies by Kevin Kiernan attest. After a careful study of the *Beowulf* manuscript he concludes that the date of the poem (as we now have it) coincides with the date of the manuscript (early 11th century), or more precisely that the manuscript is a copy of the poet's work in progress. He bases much of his argument on an analysis of folio 179, which, he argues, is palimpsest

¹.- p. 13.

made by the second scribe (Scribe B) as part of a revision of a portion of the text he had already written.¹ Moreover the revision took place some twenty years later, as Kiernan argues from a slightly changed form for the letter “a”. From these and other details (such as the misnumbering of fits and the addition of lines by Scribe B in key folios) he concludes that only the author of those lines could make such changes. Scribe B is the author of the entire second half of the poem, which is a continuation of the first half, and he may or may not have composed the first half also.

This is a sketchy summary of Kiernan’s closely argued hypothesis, but it has been challenged in an authoritative way by Leonard Boyle, who made his own study of the manuscript.² In it he asserts that folio 179 is not a palimpsest but a folio with rain damage, which was touched up not by Scribe B but by someone else, and that the “*Beowulf* text in the Nowell Codex is far from ‘original.’”³ It is undoubtedly a copy, and the peculiarities of the transcriptions show, if anything, the competence of the scribes. An important point lost in this exchange is that a crucial assumption in Kiernan’s argument which neither Boyle nor anyone else has been able to refute is that the episodes of *Beowulf*, especially the last third of the poem concerning the fight of the dragon, reveal narrative disjunctions that are consistent with the idea of multiple authorship. In other words Müllenhoff, Schüchling, Magoun, and Kiernan may be right, though for the wrong reasons, or at least for reasons that are not irrefutable.

¹.- “The Eleventh Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript,” in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto 1986), 9-21. The article is a summary of Kiernan’s book *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1981).

².- “The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf*,” in *The Dating of Beowulf*, 23-32.

³.- 29.

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It may seem like an act of vanity or foolhardiness to reopen a question which so much ingenuity has failed to settle, but it occurred to me that more light could be shed on the question, even if it was the harsh, brittle light of statistical analysis. In my book *Style in Old English Poetry*, I had some success in detecting different poetic styles in nineteen of the longer poems after observing the behavior of the auxiliary and verbal in the syntax and meter.¹ I found that poems could not readily be pigeonholed according to style -there was no distinction, for example, between epic and lay styles. On the other hand, certain poems stood out from the other in significant ways, so that I was able to come to some conclusions about the poems attributed to Cynewulf, about the style of *Exodus*, and to argue for the common authorship of the two halves of *Solomon and Saturn*.

I decided to carve up *Beowulf* into the sections that earlier scholars had done, to subject them to the same kind of analysis with auxiliaries and verbals, and to compare the results. I hoped to see one of two results: a more or less homogeneous style that would support arguments for the unity of *Beowulf* (as recent study by Klaus Grinda has done with impressive results²), or a portion of the poem such as the dragon episode, consistently showing itself to be distinct from the others. I got neither.

I chose those features of auxiliaries that I found to be most useful in the comparative analyses in my book; these are summarized in the following four tables.

¹.- (New Haven, 1987).

².- "Pigeonholing Old English Poetry: Some Criteria of Metrical Style," *Anglia* 102 (1984): 305-322.

TABLE ONE¹

Proportions of a-clauses to b-clauses

	A	B	Ratio
Guthlac B	27	71	26 / 74
Phoenix	37	57	39 / 61
Juliana	55	85	39 / 61
Elene	99	150	40 / 60
50-549	44	50	47 / 53
194-836	61	66	48 / 52
Christ III	71	74	49 / 51
2200-end	103	94	52 / 48
2550-3049	55	51	52 / 48
Guthlac A	90	82	52 / 48
Christ II	41	38	52 / 48
1-2009	198	178	53 / 47
1550-2049	47	41	53 / 47
BEOWULF	321	271	54 / 46
Christ I	45	38	54 / 46
550-1049	56	45	55 / 45
837-1629	85	61	58 / 42
1629-2199	54	40	58 / 42
1050-1549	52	38	58 / 42
2050-2549	46	33	58 / 42
Andreas	192	144	57 / 43
Daniel	92	40	70 / 30
Exodus	62	25	71 / 29
Maldon	72	20	78 / 22

TABLE TWO

Number of Auxiliaries per 100 lines

	lines	aux.	no./100
Maldon	325	92	28.3

¹.- Key to lines: 194-836 Müllenhoff, fight with Grendel; 837-1629 Müllenhoff, fight with Grendel's mother; 1630-2199 Müllenhoff, Beowulf's homecoming; 2200-3182 Müllenhoff, Magoun, and others, fight with dragon; 1-2009 Magoun, "Beowulf A"; tranches: 50-549, 550-1049, 1050-1549, 1550-2049, 2050-2549, 2550-3049.

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2550-3049	500	106	21.2
Guthlac A	818	172	21.0
550-1049	500	101	20.2
2200-end	983	187	20.0
194-836	643	127	19.8
Andreas	1722	336	19.5
Juliana	731	140	19.2
Elene	1321	249	18.9
Christ I	439	83	18.9
BEOWULF	3182	597	18.8
50-549	500	97	18.8
1-2009	2009	376	18.7
837-1629	787	146	18.5
Christ II	427	79	18.5
1050-1549	500	90	18.0
1550-2049	500	88	17.6
Daniel	764	132	17.3
Guthlac B	561	96	17.1
1629-2199	571	94	16.5
2050-2549	500	79	15.8
Exodus	590	87	14.8
Phoenix	177	94	13.9

TABLE THREE

Percentages of all auxiliaries that are initial

	auxs.	init. aux.	%
Exodus	87	32	37
Andreas	336	91	27
2200-end	54	197	27
194-836	34	127	27
2050-2549	21	79	27
Daniel	132	34	26
1550-2049	23	88	26
2550-3049	27	106	26
Christ II	79	20	25
Christ III	145	36	25
50-549	23	94	25
550-1049	25	101	25

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BEOWULF	597	140	24
Guthlac A	172	41	24
Maldon	92	22	24
Guthlac B	96	21	22
1-2009	80	376	21
1629-2199	20	94	21
Elene	249	53	21
Juliana	140	26	19
Phoenix	94	18	19
837-1629	24	146	16
1050-1549	11	90	12
Christ I	83	7	08

TABLE FOUR

Word order of auxiliary and verbal in all dependent clauses
(in descending order of Vvå)

	vV	våV	VvåÅ ¹
Elene	4%	27%	70%
837-1629	4%	32%	65%
550-1049	4%	30%	65%
1050-1549	4%	31%	65%
Daniel	4%	32v	64%
Exodus	0	39%	61%
1-2009	5%	35%	61%
194-836	7%	32%	61%
50-549	5%	35%	60%
BEOWULF	5%	36%	59%
Guthlac A	5%	36%	59%
Andreas	4%	40%	56%
2050-2549	5%	41%	55%
Maldon	22%	24%	54%
Christ II	8%	39%	54%
1629-2199	3%	44%	53%
Guthlac B	3%	45%	53%
2200-end	7%	41%	52%

¹.- v= unstressed auxiliary, våÅ= stressed auxiliary, V= verbal.

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1550-2049	6%	43%	51%
Juliana	2%	47%	51%
Phoenix	3%	47%	50%
Christ I	11%	39%	50%
2550-3049	11%	42%	47%
Christ III	17%	39%	45%

The lists include the tallies for twelve other poems to give the comparisons some basis beyond the internal evidence of *Beowulf*. The line numbers refer to portions of the poem that Müllenhoff and Magoun argued were originally different poems pieced together. (I excluded Magoun's *A* because it is only 180 lines long). I also include a series of what statisticians call trances, 500 line segments taken successively beginning with line 50, and therefore arbitrarily, from the poem, as another point of comparison. If the style of *Beowulf* is homogeneous throughout, we may expect all the segments to crowd close together; if certain segments consistently clump together away from the others on several lists, we may be on solid ground arguing for different authorship.

The actual results are scattered across the list, and even where there seems to be some clumping together around the average for *Beowulf* as a whole (as in Table One), some maverick segments nevertheless seem to go their separate ways. But before giving up entirely on the usefulness of these lists, I would like to examine them for what they can teach us, because there are indeed some lessons to be learned.

It would be useful to trace a sample segment through all four tables to see what conclusions about style and authorship it can show, such as the segment from line 194 to 836, which is the episode of Beowulf's fight with Grendel. It is also the segment (or lay) which Müllenhoff and Schücking considered to be the most primitive. Primitive or not, it is a discrete episode, so if *Beowulf* was composed

by piecing together of separate stories, traces of distinct authorial style may still be evident in these stories, traces of a distinct authorial style may still be evident in these lines. We can begin by looking at Table One, which sets out the proportion of a-clauses to b-clauses, which I have considered one of the more revealing indicators of style. Of the other twelve poems on the table the proportions range from 26% of the clauses beginning in the a-verse for *Guthlac B* to 78% beginning in the a-verse for *Maldon*. About half of the poems are grouped in the middle, within a few percentage points of *Beowulf*'s segments are within a few percentage points of the poem as a whole, except for a tranche (50-549) and the Grendel fight (194-836). So far this distinctiveness looks promising, and the tranche belongs here because most of its lines fall within the episode. If this were the only test considered, one might add it to the arguments for the separate authorship theory. But the picture becomes as murky as Grendel's mere when the other tables are taken into account. In the "Number of Auxiliaries per 100 lines," for example, 194-836 has 19.8 aux. per 100 lines and *Beowulf* has 18.8, which, when translated into actual numbers, means that the 643 lines of the Grendel episode has six or seven more auxiliaries than average. Similarly, the table for the "Percentages of all auxiliaries that are initial" has 194-836 separated from *Beowulf* by what looks like a significant distance, but it amounts to only three percentage points, which means that of the 127 auxiliaries in that segment, there are only about four more initial auxiliaries than average. Table Four, showing the "Word order of auxiliary and verbal in all dependent clauses" is even less helpful, because even though 194-836 is to *Beowulf* the other segments are randomly scattered over the spectrum, making any sort of relative comparison perilous.

Another reason not to see a distinct style in 194-836 concerns the tranches that overlap it almost equally from either end: 50--549 and

550-1049. I mentioned in passing that the tranche 50-549 is adjacent to the Grendel episode in the first table, of a- and b-clauses, but the other is ten percentage points away, on the other end of the table. In the other tables the two tranches again seem to go their own way, but for reason mentioned earlier the differences are probably insignificant.

The dangers of leaning too heavily on a single test of style can also be seen in another two of Müllenhoff's segments: 837-1628 is near the bottom of table three, and 1629-2199 is near the bottom of table two, yet they have no other claim to distinction, and their overlapping tranches -say for 1050-1549, which is the segment with by far the lowest proportion of initial auxiliaries (table 3) and also has a high proportion of a-clauses. No one has championed these 500 lines as an originally separate poem,¹ but as a part of the poem with a distinctive style, it has as much claim as any other segment. To show signs of separate authorship, I would argue, a segment should stand out from others in more than one table and should bring overlapping tranches along with it. This is not asking too much: *Exodus*, *Maldon*, and Cynewulf's *Elene* and *Juliana* are poems with characteristics that are distinctive in a number of the tables.

To press the examination further, I would like to investigate the episode of Beowulf's fight with the dragon (from 2200 to the end) for two reasons: first it is long enough to give a reliable statistical pool, and second it is the only episode that the generations of *Beowulf*-dissectors agree on. Because it is such a large segment, it would be advisable to compare it both to *Beowulf* and to the first half of the poem (Magoun's 1-2009). In the first table (proportions of a-clauses to b-clauses) the proportions of all three are within two percentage points of each other. The difference in the number of auxiliaries may be significant-- the dragon episode has about fourteen more auxiliaries

¹.- It contains the Finn episode, which accounts for less than 100 lines.

in its 983 lines than it would have with the proportions for *Beowulf* and 1-2009. The proportion of auxiliaries that are initial is 6% higher, which may also be significant. But even though this is the most promising segment to discern differences in style, it does not inspire confidence. For one thing consider the tranche 2050-2549, most of which overlaps with the dragon episode and should thus show similarities. Instead it seems to be a loose cannon on the first two tables: it is six percentage points lower in the first table and 4.2 lower on the second table -in both cases farther away than any other segment, when it should be quite close.

That is, it should be quite close if one considers poetic style (or more exactly the features that I have selected) to be evenly dispersed throughout a poem.¹ But the scattering of the segments throughout these four segments suggests just the opposite. Even elements of style that can be considered beyond conscious control, such as the number of auxiliaries and the proportion of a- to b-clauses, vary greatly from one passage to the next. It seems best to consider *Beowulf* as having a mixed style, or a style that can vary from passage to passage, which may not be surprising in the digressive, expansive narrative style of the epic.

The idea of a mixed style accords well with most readers' impression of the *Beowulf*-poet's sophisticated and varied narrative technique. With this in mind, the effort to apply statistical analysis becomes more problematical, because when all the divergent features are gathered into an average, they cancel each other out, so to speak. *Beowulf* falls squarely in that is "average" in comparison with the range displayed by other poems, but because its internal fluctuations seem to balance against each other.

¹.- Using different tests Grinda, "Pigeonholing," finds evidence for just such a conclusion.

This investigation offers several lessons. The first is practically a truism: studies of style based on statistics must be pursued with care. Before any more conclusions about *Beowulf*'s mixed style can be made, other long poems must be subjected to the same kind of analysis of their parts (to see if the mixed style is repeated anywhere), and it might be promising to investigate the different kinds of passages in *Beowulf*, such as elegiac, descriptive, direct speech, and action sequences.¹ A second lesson is an old one: a large sampling is more accurate than a small one. It is no surprise that the smaller tranches (even though made up of 500 lines) jumped across the tables, while the larger two (1-2009 and 2200-end) stayed relatively close to the total for the whole.

Perhaps the most important lesson concerns earlier multiple-authorship studies. Most depend on anecdotal and selective evidence, such as Magoun's argument that some details of one part of the poem do not agree with those in another part, or Schüchling's analysis of certain metrical and syntactical patterns. If one wants to find evidence for composite origin, one may readily find it. The tables show that almost any segment of *Beowulf* has some feature that is disproportionately represented or even unique. Each bit of evidence must be supported by other tests of style, compared against a control, which show the segment to be as consistently distinct from the rest of *Beowulf* as other poems are. No study that I know has offered such an argument. On the other hand, if one is disposed to see unity, one can point to the constantly fluctuating features to argue that what seems unusual in one part is not any more unusual than other features that vary in other parts. This argument for the poem's integrity is just as inconclusive as that for its non-integrity. The best evidence we

¹.- See, for example, Peter Lucas, ed., *Exodus* (London, 1977), 43-51, for a limited study of this sort.

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have for the unity of *Beowulf* is the manuscript, which does not show the kind of scribal breaks that one can see with the enlarged capital defining the breaks of *Christ I, II* and *III*, and the two *Guthlac* poems. This study does not prove or disprove composite authorship, but in light of the manuscript evidence the burden of proof is on the shoulders of dissectors to show multiple and verifiable distinctions in the segments. This task becomes even more difficult, though perhaps not impossible, in the face of *Beowulf*'s mixed style.

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