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"I'm Studying *Beowulf* with Beowulf Himself"

Abstract

Speculates that Tolkien may not have been the first to treat *Beowulf* in the way that he did (at least in the terms described by Professor Drout) by introducing the teaching and scholarship of Harvard professor George Lyman Kittredge (1860-1941).

Additional Keywords

Kittredge, George Lyman; Beowulf; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics"

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"I'M STUDYING *BEOWULF* WITH *BEOWULF* HIMSELF"

MATTHEW THOMPSON-HANDELL

READING SUCH AN ENTHUSIASTIC REACTION TO A *BEOWULF* COURSE, one might recall the story that W.H. Auden told, of being "spellbound" when attending a Tolkien lecture and hearing the Professor recite "magnificently, a long passage of *Beowulf*." Tolkien's significance in the history of *Beowulf* studies is assured, with his 1936 lecture "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" being widely viewed as having had a profound effect on critical approaches to the poem. Just how profound is explained by Professor Drout in his 2002 critical edition *Beowulf and the Critics*, in which he says that "while it does not mark the moment that *Beowulf* was first studied as literature [...], it does begin the study of the poem and its workings as legitimate in their own right, as something worth studying to see how it worked rather than simply comparing it (unfavorably) with other literature" (Tolkien 1). The quote that opens this Note does not, however, come

from one of Tolkien's students. What it relates is the experience of a *Beowulf* course offered to graduate students at Harvard University as early as the mid-1890s (*Graduate* 38), and the man dubbed by one impressionable student as "Beowulf himself" was Professor George Lyman Kittredge (Lowes, 469). Kittredge was a renowned scholar who taught at Harvard from 1888 to 1936. Among his academic and professional achievements were the position of President of the Modern Language Association of America (1904), Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (1910), Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy (1910), and a range of honorary degrees including from the University of Oxford (1932). Although Kittredge published almost nothing on *Beowulf*³, reports of his approach to the poem in the graduate course he gave, as well as his attitude to literary studies more generally, provide some indications that Tolkien may not have been the first to study the poem and its workings on their own terms.

Kittredge's reputation is perhaps strongest where it concerns Shakespeare. As well as covering the plays for many years in the course English 2, he edited a series of critical editions of the plays, which were published towards the end of his life (some posthumously). These continue in print today as the so-called New Kittredge editions. A student of his, looking back on his graduate days, observed that "detailed working out of Shakespeare's use of his material in *Hamlet* not only made possible a true reading of the play as he himself and his Elizabethan contemporaries understood it, but threw light on the workings of the artistic imagination" (Hanford 316). Another former student, defending Kittredge against the claim that the latter did not see any part of his role as "impart[ing] to his students a love of literature," argued that the course was an "inspiration" and that "the plays we read were unfolded before us as living organic wholes of art" (Stork 260). That the plays should be examined as works of art, rather than for any historical insights, is an attitude apparent in Kittredge's own satirical take on "a whole school of topical interpreters of Shakespeare who exert themselves to prove that many of the plays are veiled allegories on contemporary personages and political events" (Kittredge, *New Light* 3). One can see a similar attitude, to critics who might strain their interpretative faculties to the detriment of appreciating the work itself, in a lecture given by Kittredge on Chaucer's *House of Fame*:

Here eminent critics have unveiled a mystery. Chaucer, they imagine, depressed or disgusted because he has won no reputation commensurate with his merits, renounces fame altogether: it is a vain thing, a shadow

³ A single item is noted in Thorpe's *Bibliography*, being a one-page note with some observations on the name Cain (line 107) and equating it with Satan (Kittredge, "*Béowulf*" 210).

which no man can grasp. I have no wish to follow the windings of this allegorical interpretation. If ever Chaucer exulted in his powers, if ever he felt the joy of writing, the thrill of fluent expressiveness, the rapture of an active intelligence working freely in a flexible and responsive medium, it was in the House of Fame. (Kittredge, *Chaucer* 97)

All of this might, without anything more, at least suggest the possibility that Kittredge treated *Beowulf* in the same way. Happily, some details do emerge in the recollections of the *Beowulf* course that have been recorded by former students. A fellow Harvard Professor, John Livingston Lowes, wrote in 1941 how that course was a turning point which persuaded him to stay at Harvard as a graduate student: "that one hour of *Beowulf* in the year of our Lord, 1903, determined for me the next thirty-eight years." It was also Lowes who here told the anecdote about the student who felt they were studying with *Beowulf* himself (469). A further series of recollections appeared in a biography of Kittredge by a former student, Clyde Kenneth Hyder. He noted that Kittredge was "mainly concerned with the appreciation of *Beowulf*, which he sometimes translated himself, bringing out the grim humor of understatement and the stirring quality of heroic passages." Kittredge also took an unconventional (for the time⁴) position on the authorship of the poem: "he defended the integrity of the poem from the fanciful theorists who believed in multiple authorship mainly because they did not understand the nuances of Old English poetic style, or because they found something strange in supposed mixtures of pagan and Christian tradition." A final observation highlights the emphasis on the artistic values of the poem: "he knew the antiquities of ship burial, but he did not dwell on them to the neglect of the poet's fine use of Scyld's burial in a ship, his sailing away into the unplumbed mystery" (63).

Another former student, James Holly Hanford (later a Professor of English and an authority on Milton), provided a range of insights in his 1948 retrospective "Harvard Philology Forty Years Ago." It is interesting to note the observation that the *Beowulf* course "well illustrated what philological method could do toward the enhancement of an archaic and difficult masterpiece" (318). Expanding on the method, Hanford said that "it was a matter of line-by-line interpretation, with long excursions at certain points and the reiteration of a few leading ideas in support or demolition of this or that hypothesis of this or that scholar, as the evidence came along in the text" (318-319). Several key elements in the study of the poem are then highlighted. Firstly, "one outstanding conviction was that the poem is an artistic unity and no mere product of the butt-

⁴ It has for example been noted that a prevailing view in the century prior to Tolkien's lecture was that the poem was a "*Wirrwarr* of different stories tacked together by a whole sequence of incompetent bunglers" (Shippey [2]).

ending of independent lays." Secondly, "another main objective was to demonstrate the insecurity of elaborate mythological interpretations." Finally, and most persuasive of the view that Kittredge approached the poem in a similar way to how Tolkien would, is the observation that "way was made for recognition of the human and dramatic values by acceptance of the author's peculiar narrative technique as something to be understood and judged according to its own canons" (319).

Since there is an almost complete absence of published writings by Kittredge on the topic of *Beowulf*, there is little opportunity to assess his influence on later critical approaches to the poem. That said, one avenue for further research would be to examine the three editions of *Beowulf* that are contained in the collection of Kittredge's papers held in the Harvard University Archive.⁵ In the absence of such an examination, one might nevertheless speculate that those of his students who went on to forge academic careers may have carried with them some of the views and attitudes conveyed by Kittredge, contributing to an academic community that was better placed to receive Tolkien's watershed lecture. Whatever view one takes, there is a detail which suggests that Tolkien himself may have exerted an influence, albeit a modest one, on the old Harvard scholar. Kittredge retired in 1936, and on 29 December 1937 he gave a lecture in Indiana in which he took aim at Shakespeare commentators ("Shakespeare's Critics" 13). Keep in mind here that Kittredge was a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, to which "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" was addressed, and in whose Proceedings that lecture was published in 1937. The name of Kittredge's own lecture? "Shakespeare and the Critics."

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FRIAR JACK, THE SCIENCE-FICTION APOLOGIST: EXPLORING "THE FRIAR OF OXFORD" BY WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

SØRINA HIGGINS AND G. CONNOR SALTER

WHAT IF JOY DAVIDMAN WASN'T THE ONLY PERSON in her first marriage to write about C.S. Lewis? What if her ex-husband wrote about Lewis in perceptive, insightful ways that can enrich our readings of the Ransom cycle?⁶ Indeed, a newly discovered manuscript contributes to our growing awareness that William "Bill" Lindsay Gresham (1909–1961), Davidman's first husband, has more to offer as a writer, reader, and thinker than has previously been recognized. The few analyses of Gresham tend to examine only a narrow section of his life and works. Crime-fiction scholars talk about his noir novel *Nightmare Alley*, frequently suggesting parallels between his characters' inner struggles and his alcoholism or suicide.⁷ Inklings scholars often speak about him more or less as he's portrayed in the play and movie(s) *Shadowlands*: mentioning

⁶ In light of the recent discoveries that *The Dark Tower* is genuine, and Brenton Dickieson's work showing *The Screwtape Letters* was originally connected to *Out of the Silent Planet* ("A Cosmic Shift"), we are using Ransom cycle over Ransom trilogy.

⁷ For example, Craig MacDonald describes him as having a "noir life" (14).