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BOOK REVIEW

Leneghan, Francis. 2020. *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer)

Melissa Ridley Elmes

In *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*, Francis Leneghan makes a case for interpreting the famed Old English poetic narrative as ‘a dynastic drama concerning the fluctuating fortunes of the great royal houses of Scandinavia in the fifth and sixth centuries’ (x). He argues that shifting focus from the eponymous character to the wider social and familial structures that shape the narrative gives mythic significance to the poem’s monster fights, centring the legends of the Scyldings, Scylfings, and Hrethlings to present an Old English Book of Kings that ‘mythologiz[es] the origins of dynastic kingship in the pre-Christian courts of southern Scandinavia’ (x).

The book opens with family trees and a *dramatis personae* listing the names of each character in the poem with brief descriptive genealogical notes and, where applicable, grouping them into their affiliate houses, which will certainly be appreciated by students of the poem seeking to understand the relationships and affiliations of its various persons.

The introduction sets forth a framework for reading *Beowulf* as a dynastic drama, with an emphasis on contextualising this reading with chronicles, legends, and other texts contemporary to and/or clearly associable with the poem’s cultural and historical setting. Leneghan lays out in broad strokes a two-pronged twentieth-century critical reception of the poem in terms of his subject: the W. P. Ker view, that the monsters are a nuisance and a digression from the serious work of the poem in recording Scandinavian history and early Germanic kingship, and J. R.R. Tolkien’s paradigm-shifting view that the poem is more so a folktale with a historical setting, the monsters central to, rather than digressions from, the poem. Leneghan seeks to bring these views together and reconcile them; in reading this poem

as a dynastic drama, he argues, 'the dynastic material does not merely serve as "background" but provides the essential context for the monster fights, while the monster-fights themselves serve to dramatize dynastic legend' (6).

Following this initial establishment of the central argument of the book are introductory discussions of the poem's origins and manuscript and of the text's modern recovery and critical reception, consideration of the problem of the poem's uniqueness, and discussion of the poem's presentation of Beowulf as a king and of the theme of royal succession, all leading to the specific discussion of the dynastic theme which Leneghan argues lies at the heart of the poem. The introduction concludes with a statement regarding the argument and structure of the monograph and a claim that this reading resolves some of the poem's critical puzzles, its unusual structure and digressions, for example, by aligning them with one another as products of the poet's preoccupation with his dynastic theme.

Chapter one begins with a chronicling of critical frustrations with the poem's structure, offering a nice historiography of the issue. Following this discussion, Leneghan presents a series of close readings of passages that feature dynastic content in support of an argument that, through 'narrative foregrounding', a literary technique proposed by Clare Kinney in which 'certain themes are alternately emphasized or muted depending on the needs of the discrete narrative moment' (38) the poet structured his materials to emphasize its dynastic content. Rather than reading the poem in two parts, for example by way of Beowulf's youth and old age, as Tolkien recommended, it can be read as representing three phases of the life cycle of an archetypal dynasty: its birth, in the death of Scyld; its youth and maturity, in the subsequent rise of his son to prominence and generational prosperity and the digression of Offa and Thryth; and its old age, decay, and death, represented in the cautionary digression of Finnsburg and in Beowulf's speech before facing the dragon. Wherever it occurs, Leneghan emphasizes the poetic juxtaposition of one state against the other for dramatic intensity, as with Hygelac and Beowulf: 'While the aged *gūd-cyning* sits fretting over the ruin of his royal hall, the young Geat is all action and determination' (55).

Chapter two opens with brief summaries of the traditional dynastic storylines associated with each of the three Scandinavian houses treated in the poem. These provide a baseline from which to consider the *Beowulf*-poet's interventions into these traditional tales and the poetic license he took with his materials. Leneghan argues that the *Beowulf*-poet shaped the poem's narrative around King Hygelac's legendary untimely fall from power, which in turn serves as the catalyst for the development of Beowulf, a composite of an existing

story of a famous swimmer, Sigemund the dragon-slayer, possibly Old Norse folk heroes like Grettir and Bödvar Bjarki, and several folk-tale types, here rendered a dynastically significant figure representing the last of the Hrethlings. Leneghan proposes that the *Beowulf*-poet contrasts the legendary foundation of the royal house of the Scyldings against this presentation of Hygelac's decline, taking advantage of the opportunity to enhance the dramatic tension of the poem and create a poetic parallel between the foundation and decline of dynastic powers at its heart. This reading situates the poem as one using folktale elements to dramatize key moments in dynastic history, rather than a folktale in poetic form with a pseudo-historical setting, a reversal of the view of some of its famous critics, including Klaeber, Tolkien, and Niles. Leneghan concludes this chapter with a proposal that the evolution of Beowulf's legend can be understood to have eight discrete stages, assigning the last three of these as innovations of the *Beowulf*-poet. To my mind, this is among the most interesting and likely to prove one of the most contentious of his conclusions, because it is so speculative in nature; folklorists in particular will want to have a look at this chapter.

Chapter three turns to discussion of the monsters of the poem, with the central argument that they serve as portents for national crises and dramatisations of the major concerns that plague a dynasty. Grendel is painted as an illegitimate usurper through the lens of the Christian Fall of the Angels; Grendel's Mother, as a conflation of issues of gender, succession, feud, and revenge as they are encoded in the royal women throughout the poem and then inversely through her, and the dragon, as a representation of the conflict between warring dynasties, specifically, the ongoing historical dynastic wars between the Scyldings and Hrethlings. Leneghan reads the monstrous episodes as contributing to a narrative programme comprising a series of personal, dynastic, and national tragedies woven together which, in turn, shape the poem's final scenes and eventual outcome as dramatic, because it is tragic. Much of this chapter consists of the reframing of long-recognised narrative, metaphoric, and allegorical functions of these various monsters, with the analysis of the dragon being the most original contribution. I offer a good-natured quibble with Leneghan's contention that 'on the whole Grendel's mother has attracted less critical interest than her son or indeed the dragon' (178); there is almost certainly more scholarship, and particularly more recent scholarship, on Grendel's Mother than on the dragon.

In chapter four, the argument moves from discussion specifically of the materials included in *Beowulf* to how they might fruitfully be read against the biblical *Book of Kings*, making the claim that the Beowulf-poet saw something analogous between 'the flawed but

admirable kings of the Old Testament' and the 'noble, pre-Christian rulers of the Danes, Swedes, and Geats' (30). Acknowledging that 'nowhere does the poet directly compare a Scandinavian pagan king to an Old Testament ruler in the way he connects Grendel with Cain, for example' (197), Leneghan makes a case for the idea that 'like other thinkers of his age [...] the Beowulf-poet [...] understood earthly kingship through the lens of the *Bible*, in which Old Testament rulers serve as figures of Christ, the King of Kings' (198), setting up a historical discussion of kingship and succession in various early medieval cultures to frame a comparison of Beowulf's kings to Christological themes. From this comparison, Leneghan turns to a suggestion that the poem could have served as a mirror for political realities in early medieval England, broadening the poem's importance as a repository of mythic, legendary, and earlier historic materials.

The conclusion turns to a consideration of the poem's early transmission history and how its early audiences might have received and interpreted it. Leneghan traces the poem from its probable composition during the age of Bede, when English kingship was being reformed towards alignment with the teachings of the Church, through the age of Alfred, where Leneghan views it as intersecting with political, spiritual, and cultural concerns important to the Alfredian court, such as the morality of rulers and the relationship between kings and God, and the reigns of Aethelred II and Cnut, when it was copied over into the Nowell Codex, perhaps in response to the intense dynastic upheaval and renewed contact between England and Scandinavia. The monograph concludes with plot summaries of two of the Old Norse sagas potentially analogous in some way to Beowulf: *Skjöldunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

Overall, this book presents a fresh approach to an ancient text, provides a nice synthesis of the critical and historical interpretations of the poem's significance, and offers much to consider regarding what we know, what we think we know, what we do not know, and what we cannot know, about *Beowulf*. Obviously of interest to students and scholars of the poem and Old English specialists, it will also find traction among folklorists, literary historians of medieval Northern Europe, and to lesser extent, medieval feminist and monster studies scholars.

In terms of the book's presentation, it will perhaps not seem especially important or consequential, and I cannot say whether this is true of the hardbound version, but I very much appreciated that the e-book has been prepared with footnotes as opposed to endnotes. It is tedious to continuously have to flip back and forth between the chapter and its notes

when endnotes are employed, and this small but significant consideration of the reader's experience with the digital text is most welcome.