

Sisam, Kenneth, The Structure of Beowulf (Oxford at the Clarendon Press) 1965

Beowulf's Return (Lines 1888-2199)

p. 44 This part of the poem has had few admirers. In Beowulf's Rückkehr ((Halle, 1905)) Schucking surveyed earlier criticism and argued that the whole passage is the work of a poet-editor who aimed at bridging the gap between two separate stories - Beowulf's adventures at Heorot and the Dragon Fight. Tolkien felt that the poem's 'only serious weakness, or apparent weakness, is the long recapitulation: the report of Beowulf to Hygelac'. My concern here is to see how the 'Return' passage fits into the extant ~~poem~~ form of the poem.

p. 46 The variations from the early narrative have been taken as evidence of interpolation, or of the use of two parallel versions. Others have explained them as intended to relieve the monotony of repetition, though this purpose would not account for all of them. Consideration should also be given to the conditions of preliterate composition and oral delivery, for Beowulf shows many characteristics of verse that was not composed in writing or intended to be read, among them kinds of variation that seem strange to a careful modern reader.

((Sisam cites five examples in which he reconciles the apparent discrepancies and inconsistencies of the story))

1. . . . the poet exaggerates a mood or argument in order to make a strong impression, and at another place, for the same immediate purpose, says something inconsistent.

p. 47 2. Verisimilitude helps to account for the ^{repeating} ~~name~~ of Hondscio at line 2076. ((One time the name is given, another time it is not))

3. . . . from a background that has been kept completely dark the poet brings into the light some realistic detail, not at ~~all~~ the first opportunity, but when he wants it to embellish the story.

p. 48 4. . . . Though Freawru might have been noticed in the earlier narrative, there is no point at which it was necessary or convenient. . . . / ^{p.49} Any long break in the narrative has formal disadvantages; but this episode seems to me to be skilfully introduced at the best place.