CHAPTER 3

The *Wonders* in a Manuscript of Unknown Origin

*London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv*

**Introduction**

Since the publication in 1980 of Fred C. Robinson’s article ‘Old English Literature in Its Most Immediate Context’, it has been common practice to teach medieval literature alongside the manuscripts that preserve it. Attention to the ‘material text’ is, for the most part, an accepted norm and considerable attention is paid to the manuscript context of literature (even if it sometimes leads to too crude a contrast with the text of the scholarly edition). Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe’s remarks on Old English poetry are indicative of the consensus: ‘the material text, that is, the poem as transmitted and presented in an individual manuscript, is the fundamental unit in which the poem appears in the world.’ And there is no Old English text to which these observations are more pertinent than *Beowulf*. Introductions to *Beowulf* often consider the arguments presented by Kevin Kiernan’s *Beowulf and the ‘Beowulf’ Manuscript* and the responses to it. Articles occur at regular intervals that present new textual readings, or revise earlier ones. It is instructive to note, however, that with the marked exception of Kiernan, discussions of the *Beowulf* manuscript have largely been confined to establishing its thematic unity.

The thematic unity of London, BL, Cotton Vitellius A. xv has been characterised variously. Perhaps the most famous description of the volume remains Kenneth Sisam’s pithy ‘*liber de diversis monstris, anglice*’. Along these lines Nicholas Howe called Vitellius A. xv a ‘book of elsewhere’ and William Bryanston

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3 In an early discussion of Vitellius A. xv, Kenneth Sisam warned against ‘the dangers that beset a historical study in which insufficient attention is paid to manuscript indications…’: See K. Sisam, ‘The *Beowulf* Manuscript’, *MLR* 11 (1916), 335–37, at 335.
speculated that the scribe’s purpose was to compile ‘a book of “history,” or an encyclopaedic compendium that furnished “knowledge” of far-off lands, people, monsters, animals and events’. Andy Orchard’s monograph discerned ‘two themes’ that ‘uniformly exhibit a twin interest in the outlandish and in the activities of overweening pagan warriors from a distant and heroic past: pride and prodigies’. In a nuanced and convincing reading of the codex, Kathryn Powell saw in the conjunction of texts a treatment of ‘the specific opposition of rulers and monsters’; and Brian McFadden contends, albeit confining himself to a discussion of just one text, that it is a ‘site for the expression of anxieties’ caused by ‘Viking invasions, the Benedictine reform and eschatological concerns provoked by the coming millennium’.6

The emphasis on thematic unity is explicable because nothing is known of the origin of the manuscript, but it is sometimes accompanied by an assumption that the codex itself is not sufficiently ‘high-grade’ to warrant detailed consideration – had it not, of course, preserved Beowulf. David Dumville’s opinion of the scribes exemplifies this: ‘neither was, on the evidence of his script, a master-penman and that the two hands are so disharmonious when seen together suggest that the manuscript was produced in a minor scriptorium, in one (that is) whose resources in terms of personnel and materials were poor and whose output was relatively slender’.7 The images in the Wonders of the East – the only illuminated portion of the manuscript – receive a similar assessment from art historians. The opinion of Elżbieta Temple is not untypical. They are, she says, ‘[r]ather rough and incompetent but not without their own fascination...’.8 Perhaps the most generous overall assessment of Vitellius A. xv as a manuscript comes from Sisam: ‘It is the plain everyday work of a good


8 E. Temple, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 900-1066, SM1B1 2 (London, 1976), p. 72. Also Sisam, damningly: ‘bad draughtsmanship gives many of them a ludicrous effect. Unless he found them in his original, a scribe so incompetent in drawing would hardly have ventured on illustrations’ (Sisam, ‘Compilation’, p. 78).