4
Beowulf as Wayland's work: thinking, feeling, making

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> But send thou to Hygelac, if the war have me,
> The best of all war-shrouds that now my breast wardeth,
> The goodliest of railings, the good gift of Hrethel,
> The hand-work of Weland.
>
> *Tale of Beowulf*, trans. William Morris[1]

I have long been enamoured with the material culture of *Beowulf*, with the lovely and almost loving descriptions of swords, helms, cups, tapestries, coats of mail, hoards of gold. More recently, I have become intrigued by the craftworkers behind these artefacts, the carpenters, masons, weavers and embroiderers, glassworkers and leatherworkers, and especially the smiths. But what have solid, inanimate artefacts and the hard, manual labour that goes into making those artefacts got to do with intimacy? How can we think about feeling through making?

One of the challenges of this collection is to read *Beowulf* in a more personal way. Although I had not given it much thought before, this challenge made me wonder whether my own working-class background might lie behind my love for the artefactual. I am a first-generation scholar, the first in my family to attend university, let alone pursue postgraduate studies. The norm was for men to leave school at sixteen (or younger) and find a trade, which they would remain in for the rest of their lives. My entry into middle-class academia might be viewed as a 'success story' or as evidence of 'upward' social mobility, and I am grateful for the chances that have been given to me, for being able to follow pathways that were not always open to those who came before me. In many ways, I feel more at home in the library than in the workshop. The pleasure I take from reading and writing feels innate. My hands are soft, not rough and gnarled. But for working-class students and scholars, academic achievement can come at a cost. With success comes

self-doubt. The sudden transition from working class to middle class, from manual labour to the life of the mind, can leave you feeling ill at ease in both social groups, an impostor caught between two worlds, a class traitor, a kind of border-walker or *mearcstapa*.[2] The language of academia, its many unwritten rules and mysterious rituals, can seem impenetrable to someone who is late to the party. You are perpetually playing catch up with those who have benefited from expensive educations or who have accumulated years of cultural capital. Equally, I do not possess the technical skills that many members of my family, past and present, possessed, and I worry that, by embracing academia and using education to 'rise above' a life of physical labour, I am tacitly endorsing an ideology that devalues the kind of work that is carried out with tools as opposed to books.

   Is there a way to reconcile these two aspects of my identity? Perhaps unconsciously, I have been drawn to ideas that trouble the dichotomies of head and hand, manual and intellectual work, thinking and making. The first academic article that I published attempted to theorize things in *Beowulf*.[3] Inspired by Bill Brown's call to complicate concrete things with abstract theory (and vice versa) and by Jane Bennett's insistence on the vibrancy and agency of even the most inanimate of things,[4] I found a way not only to think about the artefacts represented in *Beowulf* but also to recognize that these things could actively shape the events of the poem. Material culture was no longer below, marginal or irrelevant to my academic study of Old English literature, but at the centre of it. I pursued this interest in my first monograph and, in the process of researching this work, found myself drawn to Tim Ingold's book on *Making*.[5] Ingold argues for a way of thinking through making in which sentient practitioners and active materials correspond with each in the generation of form. When we engage in acts of making we realize our existence as part of an active material environment, so that the craftsperson 'couples his own movements and gestures – indeed his very life – with the becoming of his materials'.[6] The craftworker does not necessarily impose a preconceived form upon raw materials but allows those materials to shape his or her thoughts. Understood in this way, craft unites manual and intellectual labour. Craft is making and thinking at the same time, hands and head, mind and materials, together.

   In both popular and academic spheres, craft is experiencing one of the periodic revivals that have recurred in industrialized societies from the nineteenth century onwards.[7] While current trends for

artisanal, hand-made goods could be accused of commodifying both the concept and the products of craftwork, packaging and selling everything from craft beer to home-made candles at high prices, previous craft movements were more explicitly connected to progressive politics. Contemporary 'craft' is indebted to the Arts and Crafts movement that emerged in Britain around 1880, but the so-called hipster subculture does not always share the revolutionary spirit that characterized the ideas of (among others) the famous medievalist and translator of *Beowulf*, William Morris, who looked back to the figure of the medieval craftsman as a way of advocating traditional handicrafts, positioning the beauty and pleasure of craftwork against the evils of modern industry. Morris helped to promote a picture of medieval craftsmen who had control over their labouring activity, more opportunity to exhibit individual talent, and who identified wholeheartedly with their work. As a committed socialist reformer, Morris was influenced by the Marxist notion that craft labour involves specialized processes and skills tied to particular materials, its products designed to satisfy local needs. With the transition from handicraft production to industry, both activity and product become more abstract and universal, and the relation of subject to object in work is further mediated and distanced.[8] Although Marx and Engels were critical of medieval feudalism, Morris's version of revolutionary socialism often looked back rather than forward, participating in a working-class strand of medievalism which focused on an imagined lost world of workers' rights and liberties.[9] For Morris and many others since him, myself included, craft is not only a skill but an idea that engenders intense yearning. Looking back to medieval craft and craftsmen, and promoting a return to their practices, is a way of answering a desire for a more embodied, sensual relationship with materials and tools, a more creative experience of work, and the satisfaction of shaping and constructing things from beginning to end.

We can begin to see, then, some of the ways in which craftwork might offer a more intimate understanding of makers and making. 'Solid' artefacts are constructed from active materials by sentient craftsmen whose 'hard' labour is skilled, individualized, and thoughtful. Richard Sennett defines 'craft' far more broadly than skilled manual labour, taking issue with Hannah Arendt's theory that the human mind only engages once labour is done. Rather than separating work into two domains (in one we ask 'how?' and in the other we ask 'why?') Sennett strives for a more balanced view, whereby thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making.[10] Technique

need not be a mechanical activity, for craftworkers can feel fully and think deeply about what they are doing once they do it well.[11] When adopting this utopian view of craft, however, we should be careful not to downplay the difficult, painstaking, and sometimes painful labour that craftworkers carry out. The casual association of craft with pleasure or amateurish 'play' rather than 'work' can also lead to misleading assumptions about gender, in which modes of work traditionally assigned to women get dismissed as mere arts and crafts. Spinning and weaving, for instance, are often relegated to the status of hobbies or leisurely, domestic pastimes rather than professional skills. As capitalism draws clear divisions between the workplace and the household, these skills remain undervalued and underpaid.

The popular historian Alexander Langlands has attempted to explain how 'craft' acquired some of this considerable cultural baggage. Langlands recovers the lost, early English meaning of *cræft* and resurrects the ancient craftworkers who fused exquisite skill with back-breaking labour. Rather than seeing craft as a nostalgic retreat from everyday reality, Langlands suggests that a return to an older sense of *cræft* can heighten our awareness of the environment, expand our sensory experiences, and improve our interactions with materials.[12] *Cræft* is indeed an Old English word, whose meaning ranges from the power, might, or strength of body, to an art, skill, ability, or trade, to craft of mind, knowledge, or cunning.[13] In Old English usage, the term *cræft* conveys a sense of mental ability as much as physical skill. Definitions also slide between craft as talent, or even virtue, and craft as cunning.[14] In *Beowulf*, *cræft* is often used to refer to heroic strength and prowess, as when the poet praises Beowulf for controlling his God-given might (2181). At other times, it is used to express a sense of cunning or secret plotting, as when the poet admonishes those who would conspire against kinsmen (2168). *Cræft* could carry gendered connotations in Anglo-Saxon culture, too, including the familiar association between women and textile production.[15] In *Beowulf*, weaving imagery contributes to the characterization of noblewomen such as Wealhtheow, who metaphorically 'weaves peace' among the warriors through her actions (passing mead and distributing treasure) and speeches (defusing tensions and reminding men of their obligations). Unlike in modern biases, literal and symbolic weaving is not relegated to 'domestic' labour. The mead-hall is not a domestic space but a political one and, as critics such as Stacy S. Klein have pointed out, the peace-weaving metaphor demands that one redefine the

place allotted to the domestic within the heroic ethos: weaving is as central to the construction of a warrior culture as weapons are.[16]

Yet if we expect *Beowulf* to fulfil the yearnings of our modern craft movements, offering us idealized images of labourers engaged in intimate, embodied acts of making and taking pleasure in their work, then we will be disappointed. On the rare occasions that skilled craftworkers do appear in the poem, they are elusive characters, their names and deeds passed over swiftly. Printed editions and translations of *Beowulf* are often accompanied by images from Anglo-Saxon material culture, and it is common practice to use items from the Sutton Hoo treasures or the Staffordshire Hoard as visual aids when teaching the poem. A helmet or sword hilt might be used to illustrate relationships among the elite, male, warrior class, while glass vessels or drinking horns might prompt discussions about the roles of aristocratic women or the nuances of gender.[17] Artefacts within the poem, and their extant counterparts outside of the poem, are made to speak about the human communities they create and sustain, but those communities constitute the upper ranks of heroic society. Traditionally, these artefacts are analysed for the ways in which they confirm bonds of loyalty between lords and retainers in a system of gift exchange, but the makers of these gifts are not afforded great significance and the agency of the things themselves is downplayed.[18] The conduct of men and women of the ruling class becomes our main focus, the purpose for putting material things on display. Treasures, weapons, and armour are brought into the foreground, but their real or imagined makers recede into the background.[19]

Scholars and teachers of *Beowulf* usually allow its aristocratic figures to take centre stage. There are good reasons for doing so, of course: they are reading *with* the poem rather than *against* it. This is what the text wants from us. For example, early in the poem, Hrothgar is given credit for conceiving and constructing Heorot. The hall enters the king's mind and so he hands down orders for anonymous 'men' from far and wide to build this great wonder. Hrothgar, not the workers, gets to name and rule in Heorot, dealing out gifts to his followers within its walls (67–81). Later on, when Beowulf and Grendel are fighting in Heorot, we are told that the building withstood their battle-rage because it had been braced and bound with the finest of smith-work: 'ac he þæs fæste wæs / innan ond utan iren-bendum / searoþoncum besmiþod' (but it was so sturdy, within and without, skilfully forged with iron bands) (773b–5a).[20] Again, these anonymous smiths are alluded to but not dwelt

upon by the poet. The same is true for other kinds of craftworkers, including the unnamed embroiderers responsible for the golden wall-hangings that adorn Heorot, said to be wondrous to all who gaze upon them (991–6). Weaving metaphors might illuminate the political roles of high-ranking women in the poem, but the actual process of textile production does not warrant prolonged attention.

One reason that we tend to accept the apparent irrelevance of these smiths and other labourers is because historicism has long been the prevailing mode of *Beowulf* criticism, leading to the assumption that the text means whatever it meant to the 'original' author or audience during the historical period when the work was composed. As Chris Jones has pointed out, this explains the emphasis placed on the more traditional kind of 'dating' of the poem in *Beowulf* studies.[21] For the purposes of this chapter, at least, I would rather not date *Beowulf*. My aim is to rebuff the aristocratic ideals of the poem and instead read it with and through my own working-class identity and my interest in makers, making, and material culture. How to resist the dominant viewpoint of the poem, which fixates upon heroic exploits but dismisses skilled labourers as marginal to the main narrative? First, I will explore how the products of craftwork – vibrant materials constructed by sentient practitioners – shape the heroic culture of the poem. Noble, male warriors may be thrust to the forefront of the narrative, but their reputations and relation-ships could not exist without material things. Indeed, these things often play active or even subversive roles in the poem, especially in those moments when they fail, break, or misbehave. Second, I will bring the fleeting allusions to craftsmen such as Wayland the Smith to the surface of the text, examining the tensions that the text represses by keeping the makers hidden in the shadows. The figure of the smith is potentially disruptive, I argue, because smiths possess a mysterious *cræft* that gives them the power to shape heroic culture yet exist outside of it in ways that are not always available to a warrior-king such as Beowulf.

Heroes need makers to make them into heroes. While the narrative of *Beowulf* follows the adventures of the eponymous warrior, the poem also lingers over human-made things. The three monster fights that Beowulf engages in shape our understanding of the 'plot', but anyone who reads the poem closely will get caught up in its detailed descriptions of swords, helmets, mail-coats, cups, rings, and necklaces. Similarly, the abstract concept of heroism (and the ideals and emotions such as glory, bravery, honour, and loyalty

that help to construct this concept) must be materialized repeatedly through artefacts. Aaron Hostetter has recently argued that, in *Beowulf*, powerful 'things' often stand in the way of the story and its actors, momentarily capturing and diverting the course of the narrative. These things 'interrupt the legend of the greatness of human deeds, in favour of a meditation on the status of the material world'.[22]

In revenge for her son's death at the hands of Beowulf, Grendel's mother attacks Heorot and slays King Hrothgar's most trusted counsellor, Æschere, leaving his severed head on display at the mere's edge as a sign of her vengeance. In the scene shortly after Beowulf, Hrothgar, and his men find Æschere's head on the cliffside, Beowulf demonstrates his worth by bravely entering the serpent-infested lake where Grendel's mother dwells. Before Beowulf enters the water, however, the poet takes the time to construct his heroism, bit by bit, artefact by artefact, through a lengthy description in which each piece of armour or weaponry is singled out, said to be skilfully made by smiths of old, and endowed with a heroic duty:

> Gyrede hine Beowulf
> eorlgewædum, nalles for ealdre mearn.
> Scolde herebyrne hondum gebroden,
> sid ond searofah, sund cunnian,
> seo ðe bancofan beorgan cuþe,
> þæt him hildegrap hreþre ne mihte,
> eorres inwitfeng, aldre gesceþðan;
> ac se hwita helm hafelan werede,
> se þe meregrundas mengan scolde,
> secan sundgebland since geweorðad,
> befongen freawrasnum, swa hine fyrndagum
> worhte wæpna smið, wundrum teode,
> besette swinlicum, þæt hine syðþan no
> brond ne beadomecas bitan ne meahton.
> Næs þæt þonne mætost mægenfultuma
> þæt him on ðearfe lah ðyle Hroðgares.
> Wæs þæm hæftmece Hrunting nama.
> Þæt wæs an foran ealdgestreona.
> Ecg wæs iren, atertanum fah,
> ahyrded heaþoswate. Næfre hit æt hilde ne swac
> manna ængum þara þe hit mid mundum bewand,
> se ðe gyresiðas gegan dorste,
> folcstede fara. Næs þæt forma sið
> þæt hit ellenweorc æfnan scolde. (1441b–64)

(Unafraid for his own life, Beowulf adorned himself with noble attire. The hand-linked battle-shirt, broad and cunningly crafted, would seek the lake-bed, for it knew how to defend his bone-coffer, so that his foe's grasp, a fiendish grip, could not harm his heart. His head was guarded by the bright helmet, which would explore the depths of the mere, the whirling waters: it was enhanced with riches, reinforced with wires, as weapon-smiths had wrought it in days of old, wondrously embellished, emblazoned with boar-images, so that afterwards neither fire-brand nor battle-sword could do it damage. Not least among his mighty supports was the weapon which Hrothgar's spokesman had lent him in his need. Hrunting was the name of that long-hilted sword, foremost of ancient heirlooms. Its edges were iron, decorated with poisonous patterns, tempered with battle-blood. Never had it betrayed any man who wielded it in war, those who had risked terrible travels, taken the field against foes. That was not the first time that it had performed a courageous deed.)

We are told that Beowulf is brave because he does not fear for his life, but this is coterminous with putting on war-gear. The reader might casually assume that the courage to enter the monster-haunted mere comes from within the hero, but, upon closer inspection, Beowulf draws each aspect of his fortitude from the external things he is putting on. It is the hand-made, skilfully crafted mail-shirt that will explore the depths of the mere (1443–4). It is the bright helmet, the wondrously decorated work of smiths from a former age, that will plunge through swirling waves and protect its wearer from weapons (1448–54). The sword Hrunting will aid the hero's strength and carry out a courageous deed, as it has done in the past (1455–64). Discussing this passage, Gillian Overing observes that each item is 'imbued with the capacity to think independently about its function, and even possesses a degree of interiority'.[23] Action and intention are attributed to these artefacts: they *cunnian* (search, venture, explore), *cunnan* (know how, have the power to), *secan* (look for, seek out), and *æfnan* (perform, execute, labour).

This scene accentuates the physical intimacy between the body of the hero and the armour he wears in battle. Flesh and metal are closely connected. Bravery and resilience are borrowed from helms, mail-coats, and swords. Yet at other times in the narrative, a sense of disconnection between warrior and weapon is conveyed. Unlike craftsmen who work with active materials through different stages of production, heroes simply inherit weapons and armour. Swords such as Hrunting and Nægling have histories that extend beyond the lifespan of an individual person and, accordingly, these things

can display an agency or even willpower that is not always in sync with the will of the hero. This is especially true in the later parts of the poem.

After a gap of fifty years, Beowulf has become an aged king who must do battle with a fire-breathing dragon ravaging his kingdom. Beowulf is still depicted as a capable fighter, willing to face the dragon himself, but he is not the young warrior he once was. He depends upon ever more armoury to defeat each monster (no weapons against Grendel, two swords against Grendel's mother, two swords and a shield against the dragon) and yet experiences ever more difficulty in achieving success.[24] At the same time as appearing more physically vulnerable, Beowulf begins to appear mentally vulnerable, too. The ageing Beowulf, nearing death and sensing doom, is suddenly less assured and more anxious. When news of the dragon reaches him, Beowulf worries that he has offended God and his 'breost innan weoll / þeostrum geþoncum, swa him geþywe ne wæs' (breast surged inside him with dark thoughts, as was not his way) (2331b–2). As if in response to this unaccustomed self-doubt, Beowulf orders an all-iron shield to be made for his use (2337–41).

Beowulf remembers how he survived by his own strength in his youth. Now that he is old, he remains brave in battle but must go forth against the dragon in a mail-shirt, behind a shield (2512–24). The king is at pains to stress that the dragon's flaming breath is the only reason for his reliance on armour and weapons, but, in the speeches before his final fight, he shows an awareness of his own mortality. The solid endurance of metal artefacts stands firm against the fragility of ageing flesh. When Beowulf needs them most, however, his weapons stubbornly refuse to perform their part. In the midst of the fray, with the dragon rushing towards him, Beowulf finds that 'Scyld wel gebearg / life ond lice læssan hwile / mærum þeodne þonne his myne sohte' (The shield defended the life and body of the famous king for less time than he had intended) (2570b–2). Beowulf raises his sword, but 'Hond up abræd / Geata dryhten, gryrefahne sloh / incgelafe, þæt sio ecg gewac / brun on bane, bat unswiðor / þonne his ðiodcyning þearfe hæfde, / bysigum gebæded' (The lord of the Geats raised his arm, struck the hideously patterned one with his sword, but its blade was blunted by the bone, bit less keenly than the desperate king had need of) (2575b–80). At these crucial moments, the intimate link between warrior and weapon is sundered. Objects that Beowulf believed he could count on cease to work for him, asserting their 'thing-power' and breaking into the foreground of the narrative.[25] These things emerge as

characters rather than props, exhibiting a will of their own. The shield does not meet the hero's expectations, acting in defiance of his intentions. The sword, too, does not cut as deeply as the hero desires, betraying its wielder, as it never should have.

When Beowulf throws all of his strength behind a sword stroke, we are told that 'Nægling forbærst' (Nægling broke apart) (2680b). Even though this is because the hero's hand is too strong, the poet still criticizes the blade for letting Beowulf down: 'geswac æt sæcce sweord Biowulfes' (Beowulf's sword failed him in battle) (2681b). Blame is removed from the king. Failure is attributed to the sword and shield, distracting us from the hero's flaws and transferring them on to his weapons. The narrator grants artefacts agency, even endows them with heroic characteristics, while still striving to maintain the hero's reputation. Underlying class tensions begin to surface here. Swords and shields exist to 'serve' their aristocratic wielders, and therefore material breakage or damage is represented, in moral terms, as a failure of duty. The narrator reprimands them as a haughty master might reprimand an idle or negligent servant. Conversely, if these personified weapons were to perform too well in battle – that is, if victory were ascribed to the strength of the shield or the cutting edge of the blade – then the heroic qualities embodied by Beowulf would be diminished. Ultimately, the work of the craftsman cannot be allowed to eclipse the deeds of the nobleman. Artefacts and, by extension, their makers are pitted against warriors and found wanting.

If aristocratic warriors rely on material artefacts to perform heroic deeds, they also rely on them to form bonds with one another. In perhaps the most intimate scene in the poem, a dying Beowulf sits on the edge of the barrow while Wiglaf washes his lord's wounds. Knowing that he has little time left in this world, Beowulf begins to speak:

> 'Nu ic suna minum   syllan wolde
> guðgewædu,   þær me gifeðe swa
> ænig yrfeweard   æfter wurde
> lice gelenge.' (2729–32)

> ('Now I would give this war-gear to my son, if any heir to my body, living after me, had been granted.')

Reflecting on the son he never fathered, Beowulf suddenly takes on the role of a parent wanting to bestow material possessions on a child. The ability to pass temporal riches on to the next generation

is, of course, a privilege of the highborn. But it is hard not to feel a pang of sympathy for the lonely hero in this moment. In the absence of a wife and children, deserted by all but one of his followers, all that Beowulf has left are the treasures he has won. Even the name of the one remaining loyal thegn, Wiglaf, 'the leavings of war', evokes images of spolia. The final exchanges between Beowulf and Wiglaf are emotive, yet these acts of touching and looking and speaking are mediated by artefacts. It is difficult to imagine these scenes without the presence of things. Beowulf and Wiglaf would have nothing to gaze upon, if not for the sight of the glittering treasure. Words would remain unspoken, if not provoked by handfuls of gold. Memories remain unremembered, if not induced by rituals of gift giving. The two warriors would scarcely touch each other, if not for the unbuckling of a helmet, the passing on of a neck-ring and mail-coat:

> Dyde him of healse   hring gyldenne
> þioden þristhydig,   þegne gesealde,
> geongum garwigan,   goldfahne helm,
> beah ond byrnan,   het hyne brucan well (2809–12)

> (The bold-minded lord unclasped the golden ring from his neck, gave it to his thegn, the young spearman, also his gold-adorned helm and mail-coat, ordered him to use them well)

Artefacts thus shape the aristocratic culture of the poem, giving material form to abstract ideals, imbuing warriors with bravery, sometimes asserting their own agency in the heat of battle, but also substantiating intimate bonds of loyalty and kinship. Despite the omnipresence of human-made things in *Beowulf*, however, the craftworkers themselves do not leave an impression on the poem. Can these makers be identified? Can their narratives be uncovered? If so, what other perspectives and viewpoints might we find embedded within the text?

For James W. Earl, *Beowulf* has its 'deep silences – so much is left unsaid! – in which we can hardly help but read ourselves, and out of which we draw our interpretations'.[26] As I have indicated, the poem is usually silent about the smiths who fashioned the wondrous weapons wielded by Beowulf. The one exception is the character from Germanic legend, Wayland the Smith, who is at least named and acknowledged in lines 452–5. Yet even in the case of Wayland, the poem is largely silent about who exactly this legendary metalworker was. All we can infer is that he was some kind of

master craftsman. Fortunately, other Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian sources are not so reticent about Wayland, so I will draw on these sources to interpret line 455. But I would also like to read an aspect of myself into this silence.

Beowulf is a poem obsessed with genealogy but, as Clare Lees argues, its focus is 'narrowly circumscribed' and works to concentrate social power in a few male hands.[27] When I read my own ancestry into the silence of line 455, however, other interpretative possibilities are forged. My grandmother on my mum's side of the family died shortly before I took up my first permanent academic post. She left behind a box of handwritten notes, letters, photographs, birth and death certificates, and a family tree sketched on a large sheet of paper. This document traced the Coles (the maiden name of my great grandmother on my mum's side of the family) back to the 1700s. Only the bare bones of names, dates, and occupations had been recorded, but the listed occupations reveal a history of black-smiths and other metalworkers on that side of the family, stretching back to Charles Coles (d. 1830), who worked as a blacksmith in Portsmouth dockyard in the early nineteenth century.[28] I mention this not to try and build a direct bridge between the smiths in my own family and those of early medieval England – a wide river of time still separates these two worlds – but to try and make some sense of my interest in the makers and workers of *Beowulf*. The positions from which we read and interpret literary texts are often informed by our political, moral, and ethical views – but they can be shaped by our personal and familial narratives, too.

For this particular reader, then, the fleeting glimpse that the *Beowulf* poet gives us into Wayland's work sparks a set of associations that are at once personal and historical, igniting memories of the recent as well as the more distant past, feelings of grief as well as intellectual curiosity. I cannot help but linger over line 455, resisting the forward momentum of the poem. *Beowulf* is famous for its so-called digressions, but, in this instance, it wants us to move on from this allusion to a smith and acquiesce with the poet's preoc-cupation with heroic exploits. But, if I may be allowed a digression of my own, I want to follow my own fascination with Wayland.

Wayland is difficult to love. He thwarts attempts to read him, nostalgically, as a pre-industrial craftsperson or, romantically, as a working-class hero. I confess to a degree of admiration for this maker who uses his craft to engineer a way out of enforced subor-dination, escaping the bonds of servitude and taking grisly revenge on his captor along the way. I also admit to a strong repulsion from

this cunning manipulator, who uses and abuses others, murdering boys and raping a woman, to achieve his ends. Above all, what I find most compelling about Wayland is his subversive potential. He raises questions about the 'heroic' ethos. He slides between different social ranks. He poses problems for aristocratic fighters who would seek to dominate labourers in their service.

Taken in isolation, the allusion to *Welandes geweorc* in *Beowulf* suggests that the smith exists solely to aid aristocratic characters. The reference comes early in the narrative, when Beowulf first enters Heorot, presenting himself to King Hrothgar as a warrior worthy of defeating Grendel. Directly before Beowulf begins a speech setting out his credentials, we are told that 'on him byrne scan, / searonet seowed smiþes orþancum' (on him the mail-shirt shone, a corselet linked with a smith's cunning) (405b–6). As he concludes his speech, Beowulf himself makes it clear that this is not the work of a regular smith: 'þæt is Hrædlan laf, / Welandes geweorc' ('that is Hrethel's heirloom, Wayland's work') (454b–5a). Not yet established as a hero of epic proportions, and in need of credibility, Beowulf cites Wayland's name to firm up his own reputation. We have another example of the hero depending upon the products of the craftsperson, but, when probed further, the name *Weland* summons a more socially disruptive power, a form of *cræft* that will not be restrained by class hierarchies.

The legend of Wayland tells of a smith who lives with his two brothers and their swan-maiden wives until the otherworldly women abandon their husbands, never to return. Wayland's brothers pursue their wives, but Wayland remains behind, sitting alone and hammering red gold on his anvil. The greedy King Niðhad captures Wayland while the smith is vulnerable and severs the sinews behind his knees, hamstringing the smith to prevent him from escaping. King Niðhad imprisons Wayland on an island and forces him to work as a royal craftsman. Sleep-deprived, Wayland beats away with his hammer day and night, creating trinkets for the king. It is not long before Wayland takes revenge on Niðhad by killing the king's sons when they visit his forge. Wayland then transforms their skulls into silver goblets, their eyes into gleaming gems, their teeth into brooches, and sends the beautifully crafted artefacts, made from the body parts of the boys, to their unsuspecting family members. Later, King Niðhad's daughter, Beadohild, brings Wayland her (formerly his) golden ring to repair, but the smith gives her drugged beer and rapes her while she is unconscious, impregnating her. Finally, Wayland crafts a pair of wings from magical feathers,

before rising into the air, boasting of his revenge to a distraught King Niðhad, and flying away.[29]

Wayland's story shows that a craftsman can play the leading role in a thrilling, albeit gruesome narrative. What is more, the tale in its fuller form reveals how much subversive power is packed into that formulaic phrase, *Welandes geweorc*. Whereas in *Beowulf* smiths serve kings, their handiwork bolstering heroic reputations, the legend of Wayland brings latent tensions that might have existed between rulers and makers to the surface. Here, the relationship between king and smith is fraught with hostility and resentment, abuses of power and a desire for vengeance. In the first part of the tale, Wayland shares an intimate bond with his craftwork and its products. Alone and abandoned, he makes copies of the golden ring that his swan-wife gave him in the hope that she might return some day. The repetitive labour appears to be his way of coping with heartbreak, the ring a materialization of his lost love. Then, when the smith is captured by King Niðhad, Wayland becomes alienated from his own labour, as he is forced to turn the products of his craft over to a social superior. The oppressed soon becomes the oppressor, as Wayland draws on his craft and cunning to avenge himself on his captors. Wayland repays Niðhad's greed for treasures with goblets, gems, and brooches made from his dead sons, using the craft of concealment to deceive the king. The smith uses his cunning to trick Beadohild, too, by hiding drugs in her goblet of beer and taking advantage of her unconscious state. Having been emasculated, the maimed Wayland still manages to unman King Niðhad by the end of the story. Ever the craftsman, Wayland even uses prosthesis, in the form of artificial wings, to transform and enhance his hamstrung body and escape through flight.

Wayland the Smith is a skilled worker who makes the most of his *cræft* but, in many ways, he is a far cry from the utopian ideals of the modern craft movements outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Wayland does have a certain 'revolutionary' appeal insofar as he utilizes *cræft* (both manual and mental skill) to rebel against a king. Even so, it is difficult to read Wayland as the kind of idealized medieval craftsman imagined by William Morris. Of course, the concept of *cræft* was already being redefined in a more favourable light long before the Arts and Crafts movement of the nineteenth century. It could be argued that the translations associated with King Alfred and his circle pushed the meaning of *cræft* towards the more positive connotations that it retains in modern English. According to Peter Clemoes, *cræft* was one of Alfred's favourite

words.[30] Alfred saw a craft as an inborn talent to serve a moral purpose. What the talented individual needed was the wisdom to understand the appropriate end and to render the talent accordingly effective. Nicole Discenza adds that Alfred treats labour as comparable to more spiritual strivings, in that both fulfil the responsibilities given one by God.[31] For Maria Sachiko Cecire, Alfred's conception of *cræft* as a moral good anticipates the Protestant work ethic (theorized by Max Weber) in which industry serves as a form of Christian piety.[32] Wayland fits the model of individualized, inborn talent well enough, but otherwise the legendary smith's *cræft* does not really satisfy Alfred's definition of the term. Wayland is a morally ambiguous pagan figure who, rather than directing his talent towards service of the Christian God, largely uses his *cræft* for revenge and personal gain. He embodies the darker sense of craft as 'craftiness'. Wayland's subversive power derives, in part, from his ability to withhold knowledge and conceal things from his regal captors. Similarly, the *Beowulf* poet insinuates that smiths are crafty craftsmen by describing the mail-shirt worn by Beowulf, and made by Wayland, as a 'searonet seowed smiþes orþancum' (a corselet linked with a smith's cunning) (406). This description balances a sense of wonder with suspicion, for the terms *orþanc* and *searu* can be applied to devices wrought with ingenuity but also to schemes or machinations contrived with treachery.[33]

Although the work of Wayland is worn and used by figures from the heroic age, he is said to make the same things that real Anglo-Saxon smiths might have made. The status of these craftsmen in Anglo-Saxon England is revealing. In the 1997 Toller Lecture, David Hinton argued that there was often something liminal or 'other' about the smith.[34] Socially, they were able to act as intermediaries between lord and churl. This ability to communicate between social ranks could win them favour with the kings or rulers they were bound to. There is archaeological evidence suggesting that the iron-working complexes in which smiths practised their craft were kept apart, at a slight distance from living areas. Functional explanations for this would include proximity to fuel and the removal of a source of danger from fire. But it would have also had the effect of distancing smiths and their skills from everyday experience. Those who had the knowledge to change metals into artefacts may have had other powers of transformation ascribed to them, heightening the sense that when smiths poured liquid metal into moulds and produced something totally different, they were practising a closed and hidden art.[35] Wayland, of course, is

a mythical rather than historical smith, but he may represent a long-standing awe towards the mysteries of metallurgy. The craft of concealment therefore gives smiths a degree of power over anyone, including a king or lord, who does not know how the 'magic' works. Through their ingenious yet secretive artifice, smiths possess the ability to shape aristocratic culture while existing beyond its bounds, dwelling in marginal locations, mediating between different social classes.

Their supposed 'powers of transformation' give smiths another advantage over heroes because they can use artifice to overcome corporeal limitations. Contemporary theories of disability see all people as dependent and vulnerable, so that, for most of us, impairment is the rule and normalcy the fantasy.[36] To some degree, we all rely upon and exist within networks made up of non-human bodies and forces. The category of the human is therefore fabricated through various materials, our bodies existing in a prosthetic ecology that forms the self. Richard H. Godden has shown that Sir Gawain, the chivalric hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, can be read as a 'dismodern subject' who is incomplete without the prosthetic objects that shape him as a subject. Yet these prosthetics can occasionally exert an excessive thing-power, interrupting the knight's identity and reinforcing his corporeal vulnerability.[37] As we have seen, Beowulf displays a similar dependency on non-human materials in order to live up to the ideals of heroic culture. When his swords suddenly break or fail, the self-sovereignty of the warrior's body may be called into question. Such incidents create a disjunction between the heroic human subject and the non-human object, which the narrator blames for its misbehaviour, diverting our attention away from any potential flaws in the hero. The physically impaired craftsman, on the other hand, finds a way to conjoin with objects in his moment of need.

Wayland, too, is dependent and vulnerable, and more obviously disabled than Beowulf. Yet Wayland turns his 'impairments' into advantages. The smith takes ownership of his disability through acts of making: his sinews have been severed but his artificial wings make him mobile again. In this way, Wayland fits the model of transhuman disability that Julie Singer has identified in medieval texts. According to this model, disability can represent a constructive alteration of the human state. Prosthetics supplement, rather than supplant, identity.[38] Wayland's craft adds *something* to his body in order to enhance its capacities, refusing the limitations that King Niðhad has imposed upon him. Even when physically impaired

and entrapped on an island, Wayland can still outwit King Niðhad through a combination of craft and cunning. For a hero such as Beowulf, when his mortal body becomes enfeebled by age or illness, the heart of his identity, his heroism, is at risk. Hrothgar says as much in his sermon (1761–8). When weapons begin to let Beowulf down in his old age, his physical vulnerabilities are exposed. Conversely, the smith can give new life to broken things. Even a sword such as Nægling which fails in its heroic duty, letting its lord down and shattering into pieces, can be melted down and reforged into a new weapon, perhaps receiving a new name and identity.

The body of Beowulf, first young and vigorous then aged and weary, gives the poem a linear narrative, and his death brings about an ending. But there are numerous moments in the poem when material things – the handiwork of smiths – interrupt the text to give us glimpses into alternative stories and histories, redirecting the flow of time, taking us into deeper pasts and unanticipated futures. The neck-ring that Wealhtheow bestows on Beowulf after he has defeated Grendel ferries us forward in time towards Hygelac's ill-fated raid on the Frisians. The sword hilt that Beowulf retrieves from Grendel's mother's underwater hall and hands over to Hrothgar depicts a distant, mythic past when the Flood washed the race of giants from the earth. The treasures buried within the dragon's barrow have become 'lost in history' altogether, existing outside of human society for a millennium and serving as a metonym for the 'vast grinding movement of time'.[39] It is smiths, not heroes, who work with these vibrant materials, materials that have existed and will endure beyond human lifespans. In *Beowulf*, Wayland's work is a mail-coat sparkling like summer sunlight on a youthful hero's chest. Yet when a coat of mail is given a voice in Riddle 35, it reminds us of its previous existence beneath the dark earth: 'Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig, / of his innaþe ærest cende' (The wet earth, wondrously cold, first delivered me from her womb) (1–2).[40] Just as material things display an agency that sometimes diverges from the desires of the hero, so do they persist beyond the story of his life. Their timescales make the warrior-king's great deeds seem fleeting by comparison. In the closing lines of the poem, Wiglaf and seven thegns retrieve the treasure that Beowulf won from the dragon. They then bury these treasures, which 'niðhedige men' (strife-minded men) (3165a) once took from the hoard, with their leader. These material things must 'die' with the hero, it would seem. However, as Beowulf is being mourned by his followers, his virtues extolled, the poet slips in a curious remark. Beowulf may

be dead and gone but the gold under the ground 'nu gen lifað' (lives even now) (3167b).

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

> Hwær sint nu þæs wisan   Welandes ban,
> þæs goldsmiðes,   þe wæs geo mærost?
> Forþy ic cwæð þæs wisan   Welandes ban,
> forðy ængum ne mæg   eorðbuendra
> se cræft losian   þe him Crist onlænð.
> Ne mæg mon æfre þy eð   ænne wræccan
> his cræftes beniman,   þe mon oncerran mæg
> sunnan onswifan,   and ðisne swiftan rodor
> of his rihtryne   rinca ænig.
> Hwa wat nu þæs wisan   Welandes ban,
> on hwelcum hlæwa   hrusan þeccen? [41] (*Old English Boethius*,
> Meter 10, lines 33–43)

> (Where now are the bones of the wise Weland,
> the goldsmith, who was previously very famous?
> I said the bones of wise Weland
> because the skill which Christ grants to
> any earth dweller cannot be lost by him.
> Nor can anyone ever deprive a wretch
> of his skill more easily than any man can divert
> and turn aside the sun and this swift firmament
> from its correct course.
> Who now knows in which mound the bones
> of wise Weland cover the earthen floor?)

The idea of reading *Beowulf* as Wayland's work was fuelled by my own identity and ancestry, by traces of names and occupations almost forgotten by the passage of time, by a family history of blacksmiths and other workers, at once too late and too soon for the ideals of the craft movement to be fulfilled. Academia has offered me a way up the social ladder, but not without an attendant anxiety about what is left behind, what is lost or abandoned, in the pursuit of an intellectual career, the life of the mind at the expense of the craft of the hands. I have tried to counter this sense of loss with scholarship that reconciles head and hands, thinking and feeling and making. I have interpreted *Beowulf* in a more personal way, reading with and through my own working-class background, giving greater recognition to makers and made things, resisting the aristocratic interests of the poem and instead highlighting the significance of *cræft*.

The shadowy craftsman, Wayland, is difficult to idealize, and yet that phrase, *Welandes geweorc*, invites us to rethink the dominant heroic ethos of the poem from another, marginalized point of view. It seems that Wayland was a figure who provoked mixed feelings in King Alfred and his circle, too. As with the pagan characters in *Beowulf*, the allusion to Wayland in the *Old English Boethius* may represent a continued interest in those ancestors who had been 'left behind' by the pursuit of Christian learning. Alfred's reference to the legendary smith could be taken as evidence that he did not wish to completely abandon this craftsman from the past. But the ghost of Wayland is also summoned by Alfred as a warning against the heroic pursuit of everlasting fame.[42] Wayland is but a fading memory, almost forgotten as an individual, his burial mound unlocatable. In this sense, his fate is not so different from that of a hero such as Beowulf, whose own bones have never been found. And it must be conceded that, while the wondrous work of smiths can persist throughout long ages, it too must eventually decay, as Wiglaf discovers when he enters the dragon's barrow (2754–67).

The *Old English Boethius*, however, invokes Wayland in his role as a craftsman rather than a hero. Wayland the wise goldsmith is dead and buried, but Alfred broadens his reflections out to embrace all craftsmen: the craftsperson can *never* lose their craft, nor can anyone *ever* deprive them of it. This suggests that craft is a gift that can endure beyond the loss of individual names and identities, outlasting our very bones. Craft can be passed on. Craft is what continues. Craft is what will survive of us when we are gone, and all else has vanished from memory.

Notes

1 William Morris, *The tale of Beowulf*, in *The collected works of William Morris*, vol. X (London: Longmans, 1911), ll. 452–5.

2 *Mearcstapa* is an Old English term meaning 'border-walker' which is used in *Beowulf* to describe Grendel and his mother, monstrous figures who haunt the margins of civilization. Recently, it has become the name of an organization that prioritizes the study of marginalized communities in the Middle Ages and supports and embraces scholars who themselves represent marginalized identities and communities: https://www.mearcstapa.org.

3 James Paz, 'Æschere's head, Grendel's Mother and the sword that isn't a sword: unreadable things in *Beowulf*', *Exemplaria*, 25.3 (2013), 231–51. I extend this approach to other texts and artefacts in *Nonhuman voices*

in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

4 Bill Brown, 'Thing theory', *Critical inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1–22; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

5 Tim Ingold, *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

6 Ibid., p. 31.

7 Some of my thoughts about craft have been informed by a workshop I co-organized with my colleague, Anke Bernau, on 'Craft in medieval and early modern England' at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, 2 June 2016. I am grateful to all involved.

8 Sean Sayers, 'The concept of labour: Marx and his critics', *Science & society*, 71.4 (2007), 431–54, at 439–40.

9 See further David Matthews, *Medievalism: a critical history* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 56–7.

10 Richard Sennett, *The craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p. 7.

11 Ibid., p. 20.

12 Alexander Langlands, *Cræft: how traditional crafts are about more than just making* (London: Faber, 2017).

13 See the entry for *cræft* in Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Old English*, online (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

14 For the meaning of *craft* in Middle English, see Nicola Masciandaro, *The voice of the hammer: the meaning of work in Middle English literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

15 See further Maren Clegg Hyer and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 'Woven works: making and using textiles', in Maren Clegg Hyer and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (eds), *The material culture of daily living in the Anglo-Saxon world* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2011), pp. 157–84.

16 Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling women: queenship and gender in Anglo-Saxon literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 104.

17 See Maren Clegg Hyer, 'Material culture and teaching *Beowulf*', in Howell Chickering, Allen J. Frantzen, and R. F. Yeager (eds), *Teaching Beowulf in the twenty-first century* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2014), pp. 177–84; see also Marijane Osborn, 'Visualising the material culture of *Beowulf*', in the same volume, pp. 185–93.

18 A classic study of gift exchange in the poem is Ernst Leisi, 'Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*', *Anglia*, 71 (1952).

19 There have, of course, been studies of Anglo-Saxon crafts and craftsmen more generally. An examination of the archaeological evidence is given in Kevin Leahy, *Anglo-Saxon crafts* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003).

20 All references to *Beowulf* are taken from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) and

cited in text by line number. Translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

21 Chris Jones, 'From Heorot to Hollywood: *Beowulf* in its third millennium', in David Clark and Nicholas Perkins (eds), *Anglo-Saxon culture and the modern imagination* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 13–29, at 14–18.

22 Aaron Hostetter, 'Disruptive things in *Beowulf*', *NML*, 17 (2017), 34–61, at 35.

23 Gillian R. Overing, '*Beowulf*: a poem in our time', in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *The Cambridge history of early medieval English literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 309–31, at 325.

24 Andy Orchard, *Pride and prodigies: studies in the monsters of the Beowulf-manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), p. 29.

25 Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, pp. 2–4; cf. Brown, 'Thing theory', p. 4.

26 James W. Earl, '*Beowulf* and the origins of civilisation', repr. in Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey (eds), *The postmodern Beowulf: a critical casebook* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006), pp. 259–85, at 265–6.

27 Clare A. Lees, 'Men and *Beowulf*', in Joy and Ramsey (eds), *The postmodern Beowulf*, pp. 417–38, at 431.

28 The family tree was compiled by my grandmother's cousin, Laurence Coles, and was initially based on information kept in the Hampshire Record Office, in Winchester.

29 Although I have Anglicized the names, this summary is based primarily upon the *Völundarkviða*, probably composed *c*. 900–1050. It is possible that *Völundarkviða* was produced in an area of Anglo-Saxon England under Scandinavian influence. See John McKinnell, 'The context of *Völundarkviða*', in Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (eds), *The Poetic Edda: essays on Old Norse mythology* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 198–212. That the legend of Wayland was known by the Anglo-Saxons more generally is evidenced by the carvings on the Franks Casket and by literary allusions in *Deor*, *Waldere* and, of course, *Beowulf*. For a comprehensive study of the various traditions associated with Wayland, see H. R. Ellis Davidson, 'Weland the Smith', *Folklore*, 69.3 (1958), 145–59.

30 Peter Clemoes, 'King Alfred's debt to vernacular poetry: the evidence of *ellen* and *cræft*', in Michael Korhammer, Karl Reichl, and Hans Sauer (eds), *Words, texts and manuscripts: studies in Anglo-Saxon culture presented to Helmut Gneuss* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 223–6.

31 Nicole Guenther Discenza, 'Power, skill and virtue in the Old English Boethius', *ASE*, 26 (1997), 81–108.

32 Maria Sachiko Cecire, '*Ban Welondes*: Wayland Smith in popular culture', in Clark and Perkins (eds), *Anglo-Saxon culture and the modern imagination*, pp. 201–17, at 205.

33 See the entries on *orþanc* and *searu* in James Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary* (Oxford, 1898), with *Supplement* by

T. N. Toller (1921) and *Revised and enlarged addenda* by A. Campbell (1972).

34 David A. Hinton, 'Anglo-Saxon smiths and myths', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 80.1 (1998), 3–22.

35 Ibid., pp. 14–15.

36 Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over backwards: disability, dismodernism and other difficult positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 31.

37 Richard H. Godden, 'Prosthetic ecologies: vulnerable bodies and the dismodern subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Textual practice*, 30.7 (2016), 1273–90.

38 Julie Singer, 'Toward a transhuman model of medieval disability', *postmedieval*, 1.1/2 (2010), 173–9.

39 Hostetter, 'Disruptive things in *Beowulf*', p. 59.

40 References to the Exeter Book are taken from Bernard J. Muir (ed.), *The Exeter anthology of Old English poetry: an edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994) and cited in the text by line number. Translations are mine.

41 Text and translation are taken from Susan Irvine and Malcolm R. Godden (eds and trans.), *The Old English Boethius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

42 These contrasting views of Wayland are weighed up by Paul Anthony Booth, 'King Alfred versus *Beowulf*: the re-education of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 79.3 (1997), 41–66.