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Scribal Practice in the *Beowulf* Manuscript[1]

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There was a time, not too long ago, when we thought we knew a great deal more about *Beowulf* than we do now. We knew that the poem, originally a work of oral composition, had first been written down in the seventh century and had been copied repeatedly until the final copy (our extant manuscript: British Library, Cotton, Vitellius, A.XV, ff. 94-209) was made sometime around 1000 AD. That particular manuscript, now known as the Nowell Codex, was the product of a single scriptorium, the work of two scribes, who included *Beowulf* in a single multi-text volume which emphasized monsters.[2] In spite of the fact that the manuscript suffered in the dreadful fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, removing any trace of its binding or even of conjugation and thus leaving a stack of disjunct and deteriorating leaves, we have had little doubt as to the original structure and makeup of the codex before the fire. But now we are less sure of the date for the composition of the poem and some even question if it is the product of oral composition. The structure of the Nowell Codex has been examined anew and found to be far from self evident, and from this uncertainty about the integrity of the Nowell Codex has come a suggestion that the *Beowulf* portion is in fact a separate manuscript.[3]

Because of the extensive damage to the Nowell Codex, its structure has never been entirely self-evident. A number of scholars has examined the Codex: Max Förster in 1919, E. V. K. Dobbie in 1953, Neil Ker in 1957, Kemp Malone in 1963, Kevin Kiernan in 1981, Leonard Boyle in 1981, and Johan Gerritsen in 1988.[4] While each of their analyses differs in some degree in its conclusions, only one (Kiernan) is markedly

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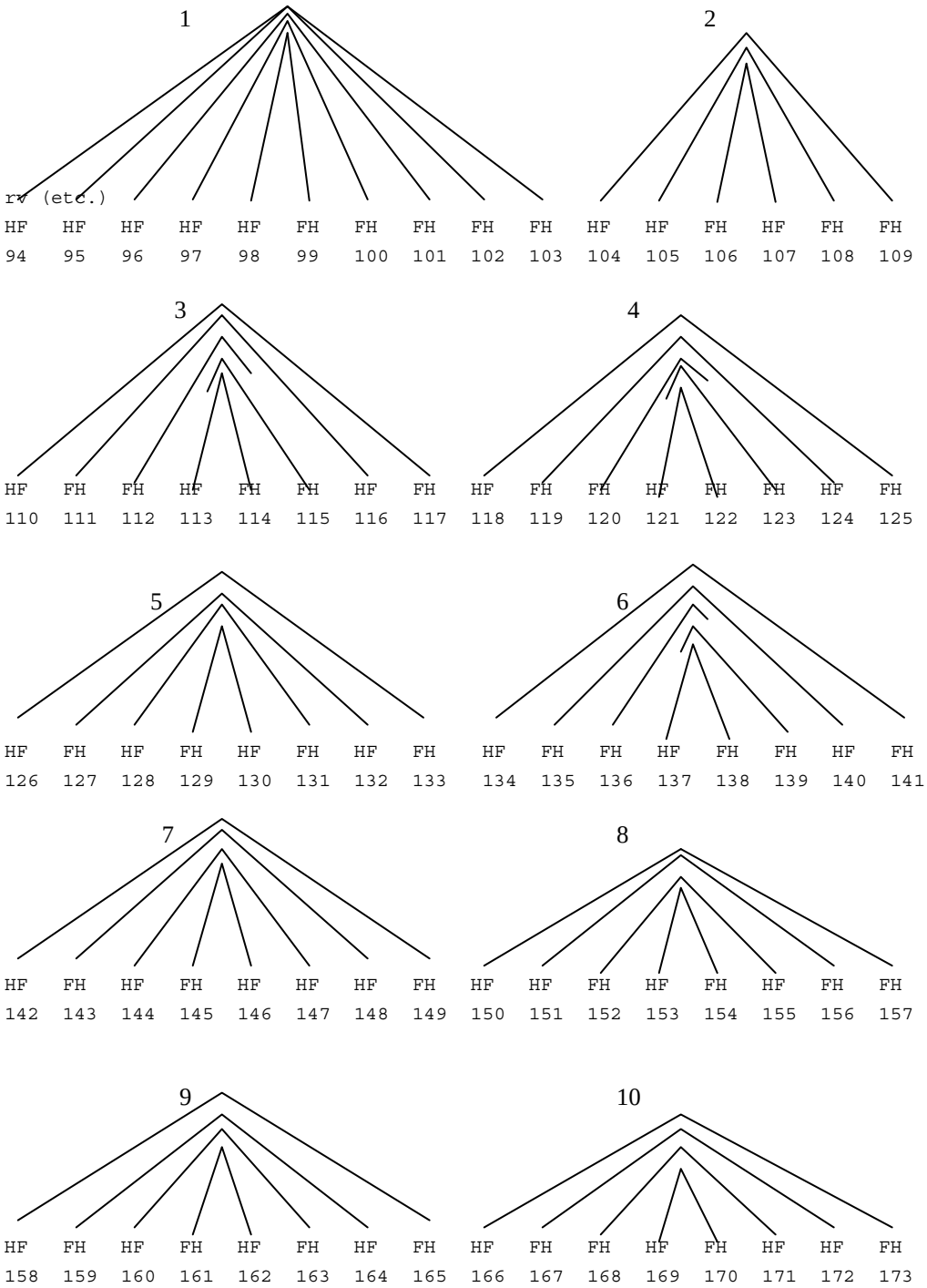
[1] An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Codicological Considerations in the *Beowulf* Manuscript" in *Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* 1 (1984): 13-27.

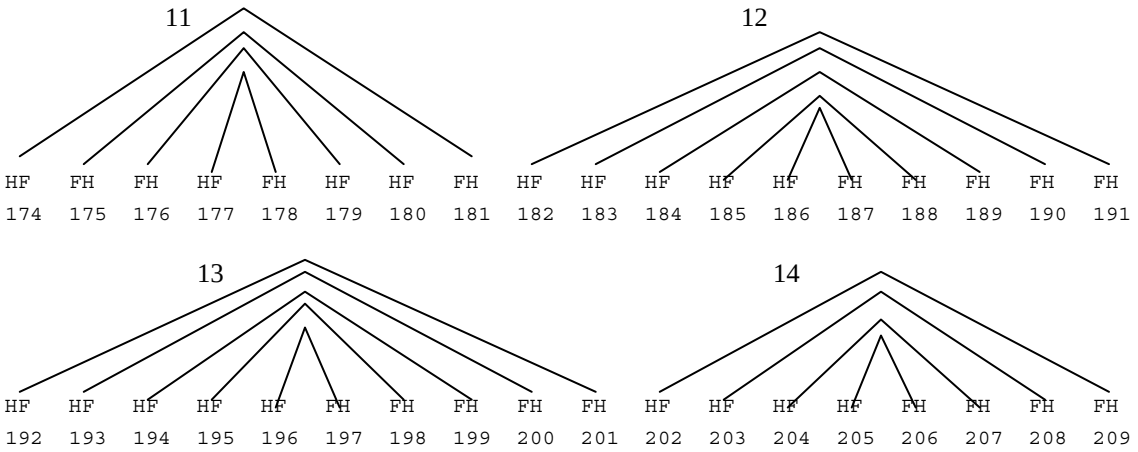
[2] See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), and Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the* Beowulf-*Manuscript* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995).

[3] Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1981).

[4] Max Förster, *Die Beowulf-Handschrift* (Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften auf Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse 71 [1919]); E. V. K. Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith* (Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 4 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1953]); Neil R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); Kemp Malone, ed., *The Nowell Codex (British Museum Cotton Vitellius A.XV, Second MS*) (Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile [Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963]); Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*; Leonard Boyle, "The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf*," in *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), ed. by Colin Chase; Johan Gerritsen, "British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv: A Supplementary Description," *English Studies* 69 (1988): 293-302. Most of the editions have descriptions of the MS, but no collation. Kenneth Sisam's two articles "The Beowulf Manuscript" (pp. 61-64) and "The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript" (pp. 65-97) in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953) are very useful, but contain no collation. For the first part of Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the Southwick Codex, see Roland Torkar, "Cotton Vitellius A.xv (pt. 1) and the Legend of St. Thomas," *English Studies* 67 (1986): 290-303.

different in its departure from the traditionally accepted collation. (For the purposes of this study, we may take Malone's collation from his facsimile, to represent the traditionally accepted collation.) Figure 1 below sets out the hair-flesh sequences of the Nowell Codex following the official foliation of the British Library.





The hair-flesh sequences clearly establish the larger structure of all the gatherings except quires 5 and 6. Quire 1 is a gathering of five sheets or ten folios, all with the hair sides out. This is unusual, first in that the gathering is comprised of five sheets, and second in that each sheet is aligned with the hair side outward. Quire 2 is made up of three sheets or six folios: the hair-flesh sequence illustrates that no other configuration is possible. In this quire, however, the normal alternation of hair opposite hair and flesh opposite flesh has not been maintained in the outer sheet. Here, where we might expect the flesh side to face outward if the alternation were maintained, the hair side faces outward, but of course this is not at all unusual, as it was customary in an outer sheet of a gathering that the hair side face outward to protect the quire. Indeed, this is true for all fourteen quires of the Nowell Codex. Quire 2, however, is actually an original gathering of four sheets which has been reduced to three by the removal of the second sheet. Alternatively the outer sheet may have been removed and the second sheet (now the outer sheet) reversed so that the hair side faces outward; the result would be identical. Normal gatherings of four sheets which maintain the standard alternation of hair opposite hair and flesh opposite flesh always have the hair side of the inner sheet inward and thus the hair side of the outer sheet outward. Conversely, an original three-sheet quire has the flesh side of the inner sheet inward and, thus, the hair side of the outer sheet outward. It is therefore clear that quire 2 was originally a four-sheet gathering.

It has long been recognized that ff. 110-117 and 118-125 must make up two discrete gatherings. The manuscript foliation, and of course the text, reflects the transposition of the two gatherings by an early-modern binder, and the hair-flesh sequences illustrate that ff. 110-117 and 118-125 do indeed constitute quire 3 (which is actually 4) and 4 (which is actually 3). Each of these gatherings consists of an original three-sheet quire augmented by a pair of singletons (ff. 3 and 6). If we remove the pairs of singletons the two gatherings make perfectly regular gatherings of three sheets or six folios, and as further corroboration, the inner sheets of both quires are positioned flesh side inward, as is standard in three-sheet quires. Unfortunately, the hair-flesh sequences fail us in quires 5 and 6. There are two, or even three possible configurations, but I will return to these in more detail below.

Quire 7 is seemingly a normal gathering of eight folios, except that folio 6 (f. 147) cannot possibly be conjugate with folio 3 (f. 144); folio 3 is hair side outward, while folio

6 is flesh side outward. Folio 6 is out of sequence and must be a replacement leaf. This leaf probably reflects a botched original f. 147 (hair side out) which was excised and replaced by our extant f. 147 (flesh side out). Quire 8 is also seemingly a normal gathering of eight folios. Although each of the four bifolia appears to be conjugate, the hair-flesh sequence is irregular. The quire was originally made up of three sheets (the inner sheet has the flesh side inward), and then either an outer sheet was added (conjugate folios 1 and 8) or an extra sheet (conjugate folios 2 and 7) was inserted. Both of these sheets have the hair side facing outward; the removal of either restores the normal hair-flesh sequence. There is also the possibility that folios 2 and 7 are each singletons, but this is impossible to determine as each has the hair side outward. In any case, quire 8 was originally a quire of three sheets which was augmented by one sheet or perhaps two singletons.

Quire 9 is a perfectly normal gathering of four sheets, or eight folios, which maintains a regular hair-flesh sequence. Each of quires 10 and 11, on the other hand, exhibits an irregularity in its hair-flesh sequence: one sheet (or possibly two singletons) made up either of folios 2 and 7 or of folios 3 and 6 has been inserted into what was originally a gathering of three sheets (again, the inner sheet has the flesh side inward). If we remove the added sheet (or two singletons), the quire is restored to its original regularity. Quires 12 and 13 are identical in makeup to quire 1. Each of these quires consists of five sheets or ten folios, all with the hair sides outward.

Quire 14, which comprises the fragmentary *Judith*, is a gathering of four sheets or eight folios, all with the hair sides out. As the text of folio 202^{r} begins in mid-passage, several quires, probably comprising twenty-four folios, are missing between quires 13 and 14. The text ended imperfectly on folio 209^{v}, but someone in an early-modern Anglo-Saxon minuscule hand has supplied the end of the poem from a now-lost source. Dobbie believed that this source was a single leaf that had been attached to the end of quire 14,[5] but, although possible, this seems most unlikely: single leaves were rarely attached at the end of a gathering. Kiernan suggested that another work followed which was detached for some reason, but that someone had completed the poem from the few lines on the first folio of the detached work.[6] It seems more likely, however, that quire 14 was originally made up of five sheets, like quires 1, 12, and 13 and that the outer sheet had become detached and perhaps the two conjugate folios separated. The final folio may have been in such a worn condition that the few remaining lines of *Judith* were copied onto f. 209^{v}, and the final folio was lost or discarded.

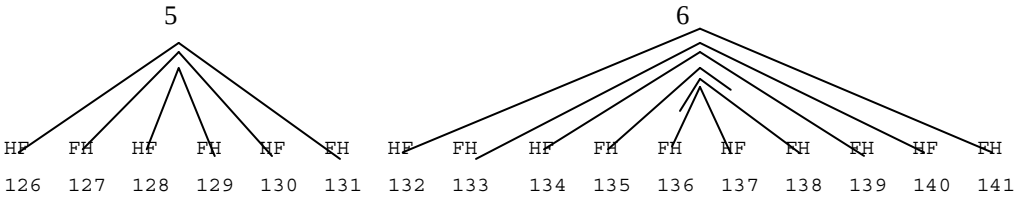
The physical structures of the quires produced in our anonymous scriptorium are of three types. Type 1 is an original gathering of three sheets in which the inner sheet has the flesh side inward. In every instance (quires 3, 4, 8, 10, 11) the quire has been expanded to a gathering of eight folios by the addition of two singletons or an extra sheet. Type 2 is an original gathering of four sheets in which the inner sheet has the hair side inward (quires 7 and 9; quire 2 has been reduced from four by the removal of one sheet). Type 3 is an original gathering of five sheets, all with the hair sides facing outward (quires 1, 12, 13, and possibly 14 which probably lost its outer fifth sheet).

The arrangement of the hair and flesh sides in ff. 126-141, quires 5 and 6, is ambiguous. There are three possible collations. The traditional collation divides these

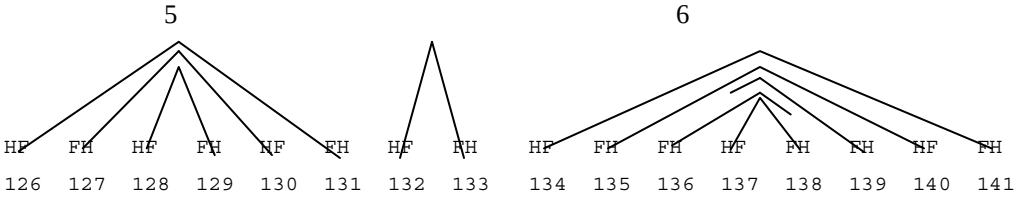
[5] Dobbie, p. xv.
[6] Kiernan, pp. 159-163.

sixteen folios into two quires of eight; thus *Beowulf* begins on the seventh folio recto of quire 5. In this scheme, quire 5 is a perfectly normal type 2 four-sheet gathering. Quire 6 is a perfectly normal type 1 gathering which exhibits an original three-sheet gathering augmented by the insertion of two singletons (ff. 3 and 6).

A second possible collation divides these sixteen folios into two quires, the first of six, the second of ten; thus *Beowulf* begins on the first folio of quire 6 (see figure 2 below). In this scheme, quire 5 is a normal gathering of three sheets. Quire 6 is an original gathering of four sheets which has been expanded to ten folios by the addition of folios 4 and 7. Quire 6 of this scheme, although possible, is highly unlikely. As we have seen, the scriptorial practice of the scribes who produced the Nowell Codex falls into three types, but there is no precedent for an expanded quire of four sheets. This quire 5, although unique in that it is not an original three-sheet quire augmented to form a gathering of eight folios, is at least an original gathering of three sheets. However, quire 6, an original gathering of four sheets, augmented to form a gathering of five sheets, is totally foreign to the established custom of this scriptorium.



A third possible collation (see figure 3 below) divides these sixteen folios into two quires with a bifolium between them, the first quire of six, the second of eight; thus *Beowulf* begins on the first folio of quire 6.[7] In this scheme, quire 5 is a three-sheet gathering, but unlike all the other type 1 three-sheet gatherings it is not augmented to create a four-sheet quire. This quire structure is plausible, but is found nowhere else in the manuscript. On the other hand, quire 6 is a standard type 1 gathering. However the bifolium between the two quires is highly unlikely. Inserted bifolia were rarely placed between quires as they could easily become detached and lost. Common practice was to insert a bifolium into a quire between folios 2 and 3, or 3 and 4, or 5 and 6, or 6 and 7, thus ensuring it would be firmly attached to the book. In addition there is no precedent for such a bifolium in this manuscript.



[7] This was suggested during a special session, "The Dating of *Beowulf*: Critical Responses to Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*," organized by Allen Frantzen at the 1982 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Los Angeles, December 30, 1982.

Kiernan's most compelling argument for separating the prose works from *Beowulf* is, as he views it, the distinctively differing codicological formats of the two sections.[8] With the exception of the so called "anomalous" first quire, all the quires before *Beowulf* are essentially gatherings of three sheets and therefore, argues Kiernan, quire 5 must also be a gathering of three sheets. As we have seen, however, quire 2 was originally a four-sheet gathering. Kiernan contrasts the supposed three-sheet format of quires 2-5 with quires 7-11, in which he claims to discern a four-sheet format. As I have illustrated, however, only quires 7 and 9 have an original four-sheet format; quires 8, 10, and 11 have an original three-sheet construction. Hence, there is no distinctive contrasting change in format; rather there is a continuity which clearly identifies these quires as part of a single project of copying.

The *Judith* fragment, quire 14, is more problematic. Because there is a gap of unknown length between the end of *Beowulf* and quire 14, it is more difficult to make any conclusion based on continuity in the codicological format of Scribe B's portion. We have three quires which were made by or for Scribe B: quires 12 and 13 are five-sheet gatherings, all the hair sides out; quire 14 is quite likely to have originally been a similar gathering. Scribe B's consistent format is of five-sheet gatherings constructed with the hair sides facing out. It thus seems likely that Scribe B (or the person who made his quires) also made quire 1, as it also exhibits this highly distinctive and idiosyncratic format.

Kiernan has suggested that there is a format difference in the size of the writing frame of the *Judith* fragment.

> What makes this especially valuable as evidence is that the number of lines per page in *Beowulf* varies in different quires from twenty lines, to twenty-one lines, to twenty-two lines, and yet the written space between the first and last rulings, regardless of the number of lines per page, is uniformly between 17 and 18 cm., usually about 17.5 cm. This shows that even when the scribes departed from the normal number of lines (twenty), they took care, for aesthetic reasons, to make the written space of all pages throughout the *Beowulf* codex a uniform size. In the case of the *Judith* fragment the written space between the first and last rulings is between 16 and 16.5 cm. The difference is distinct, and can hardly be fortuitous: *Judith* was not ruled to fit the same format as the *Beowulf* codex.[9]

In fact, the written space in the *Judith* fragment (measured between the first and last rulings) is between 16.6 and 17.1 cm; the average is 16.9 cm. Kiernan claims that the average for this same measurement in the quires of *Beowulf* is 17.5 cm. The actual size, however, is 17.1 cm., which is only 2 mm. difference from the measured average in the *Judith* fragment. It is obvious that *Judith* was ruled to fit the same format as the three prose works and *Beowulf*. Far from separating *Judith* from *Beowulf*, this evidence in fact supports the traditional belief that *Judith* was part of the same copying project which produced *Beowulf*.

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[8] Kiernan, pp. 125-26.
[9] Kiernan, p. 151.

One possible impediment to this scheme is the presence of a worm-hole in quire 13, which has no equivalent in quire 14. In other words, when this worm ate his way through the final gathering of *Beowulf*, quire 14 was not next to it. But since the first part of *Judith* has been lost, quire 14 was not originally adjacent to quire 13. It is in the now-lost intervening folio(s) that we would have found traces of the worm. Father Leonard Boyle, on the other hand, suggested that the worm had feasted on quire 13 before any other gatherings had been joined to it, and he may well be right.[10] We cannot know how long the finished unbound quires may have been stored. Certainly quires 12 and 13 were finished before Scribe A's gatherings and a hungry worm would have had ample opportunity to bore into quire 13. Thus, although we cannot be sure when the worm-hole was made, its presence fails to exclude *Judith* as the fifth member of this composite codex.

Quire 14 (and however many lost folios) was probably copied before quires 12 and 13 as Leonard Boyle has suggested. Kiernan has questioned Förster's conclusion that *Judith* was once composed of twenty-four additional folios before quire 14.[11] It may be that *Judith* is nearly complete and therefore that the outer sheet is all that is missing from quire 14, or any number of complete quires (four sheets, three sheets, or more likely Scribe B's normal format of five sheets) may have disappeared. For the purposes of this essay it matters not at all whether the missing folios contained only *Judith* or perhaps some other works as well. Whatever has been lost comprised Scribe B's first stint of copying. As both Boyle and Kiernan point out, the final folio of *Beowulf* (f. 210^{v}) is crowded with text; the scribe obviously had no more folios, as he would have had with *Judith* still to copy. He must, therefore, have copied quires 12 and 13 after *Judith*. Again, both Boyle and Kiernan have demonstrated that the final portion copied by Scribe B was in quire 11, where he took over from Scribe A. Once again, it is obvious that Scribe B was faced with only so much parchment and a certain number of lines to be written. His solution here was not to crowd them as on the final folio of *Beowulf*, but to add one line of text to four folios (177^{v}-179^{r}). Scribe B must, therefore, have copied *Judith* first (probably in quires of five sheets with all the hair sides facing out), then quires 12 and 13 of *Beowulf*, and finally the remainder of quire 11. Scribe A, on the other hand, seems to have copied his material straight through from quire 1 to 11 before breaking off. If Förster was correct in estimating that one gathering of ten folios has been lost from the beginning of *Christopher*, this gathering may well have been one of Scribe B's distinctive five-sheet quires. Indeed, the first extant quire is just such a gathering. Surely it is no accident that both scribes began their stints with these distinctive gatherings of five sheets. This further associates the prose works (quire 1) with *Beowulf* (quires 12 and 13), and quite possibly *Judith* (quire 14)— if quire 14 was indeed originally a gathering of five sheets.

In summary, the collation of the Nowell Codex is as Kemp Malone described it in his facsimile: 1^{10}, 2^{6}, $3\text{-}11^{8}$, $12\text{-}13^{10}$, 14^{8}. *Christopher*, *Marvels of the East*, *Alexander's Letter*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith* make up a single, unified, composite manuscript—the Nowell Codex.

[10] Boyle, p. 31.
[11] Kiernan, pp. 162-167.