CONTENTS

chapter 1

EPICS

Mewar Rāmāyana

VALMIKI (*fl. c.*500 BC)

1649–53. British Library. Add MS 15296(1). f.70r–70v. Folio 23 × 39 cm. Black and red ink on slightly burnished paper; opaque watercolours on slightly burnished paper.

The Rāmāyana is one of India's best-loved and most enduring stories. First told some 2,500 years ago in the Sanskrit epic poem ascribed to the sage Valmiki, it has been retold in different forms in many regional languages of India and beyond.

The story follows Prince Rāma of Ayodhya, who has to go into exile as a result of his stepmother's plotting; his wife Sītā and brother Lakshmana accompany him. When Sītā is abducted by the wicked demon-king, Ravana, armies of monkeys and bears help Rāma and Lakshmana in their frantic search for her, until she is discovered by the devoted monkey Hanuman in Ravana's stronghold of Lanka. After an epic battle, in which Ravana perishes, Sītā is rescued and returns with Rāma in triumph to Ayodhya.

A text of great literary and religious significance, the Rāmāyana enshrines the Hindu idea of dharma and continues to have an incomparable and lasting influence on culture and society in India and beyond. It has inspired countless artistic expressions in all fields.

This manuscript was commissioned in 1649 by Maharana Jagat Singh, the ruler of Mewar in Rajasthan. Five of its seven books are now in the British Library, while other parts of the manuscript remain in India, where they are held by three separate institutions and a private collection.

Originally in the traditional unbound *pothī* format, consisting of loose leaves, the Sanskrit text consists of 24,000 verses copied by the Jain scribe Hīrānanda. Over 400 lavish full-page paintings depicting episodes from the story accompany the text.

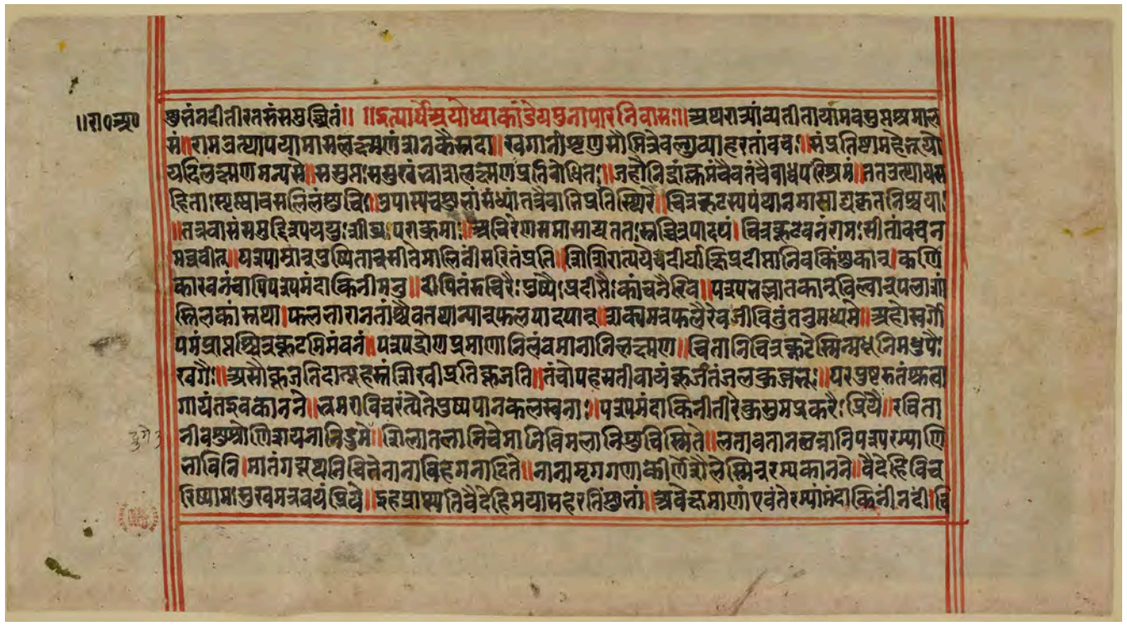
This scene shows Rāma, Sītā and Lakshmana in the Citrakuta forest. It was painted by Sahib Din, a Muslim master artist who illustrated two books of the manuscript. Sahib Din used various narrative techniques in his paintings: here a sequence of events is presented on one page through multiple appearances of the same characters.

Sarga 50

5. As Rāma set out in the early morning with Saumitri, he began to speak to lotus-eyed Sītā.

6. "Look, Vaidehī, the *kiṃ*śuka trees are in full blossom now that winter is past. Garlanded with their red flowers they almost seem to be on fire.
7. "Look at the marking-nut trees in bloom, untended by man, how they are bent over with fruit and leaves. I know I shall be able to live.
8. "Look at the honeycombs, Lakəmaəa, amassed by honey bees on one tree after another. They hang down as large as buckets.
9. "Here a moorhen is crying, and in answer to it a peacock calls through delightful stretches of forest richly carpeted with flowers.
10. "And look there is Citrakūəa, the mountain over there with the towering peak, teeming with herds of elephants and echoing with flocks of birds."
11. So the brothers and Sītā proceeded on foot and reached the delightful mountain, charming Citrakūəa.
12. And on reaching the mountain, where birds of every description came flocking, he said, "This will be our dwelling for now. We shall enjoy ourselves here, dear brother.
13. "Fetch wood, dear Lakəmaəa, good, hard wood and build a place to live, for my heart is set on living here.
14. Hearing his words Saumitri, tamer of foes, went and brought different kinds of trees, and built a leaf hut.

Translated by Sheldon I. Pollock, edited by Robert P Goldman, *The Ramayana of Valmiki, Volume II, Ayodhyakanda* (Princeton University Press. 1986) pp.190-191



Paradise Lost

JOHN MILTON (1608–1674)

Manuscript *c.*1665; contract 27 April 1667. Iron gall ink on laid paper; iron gall ink and wax seal on laid paper. The Morgan Library & Museum, MA 307, f.2r; British Library, Add MS 18861. MA 307 volume 19.5 × 19.9 cm; Add MS 18861, folio 30.2 × 19.4 cm.

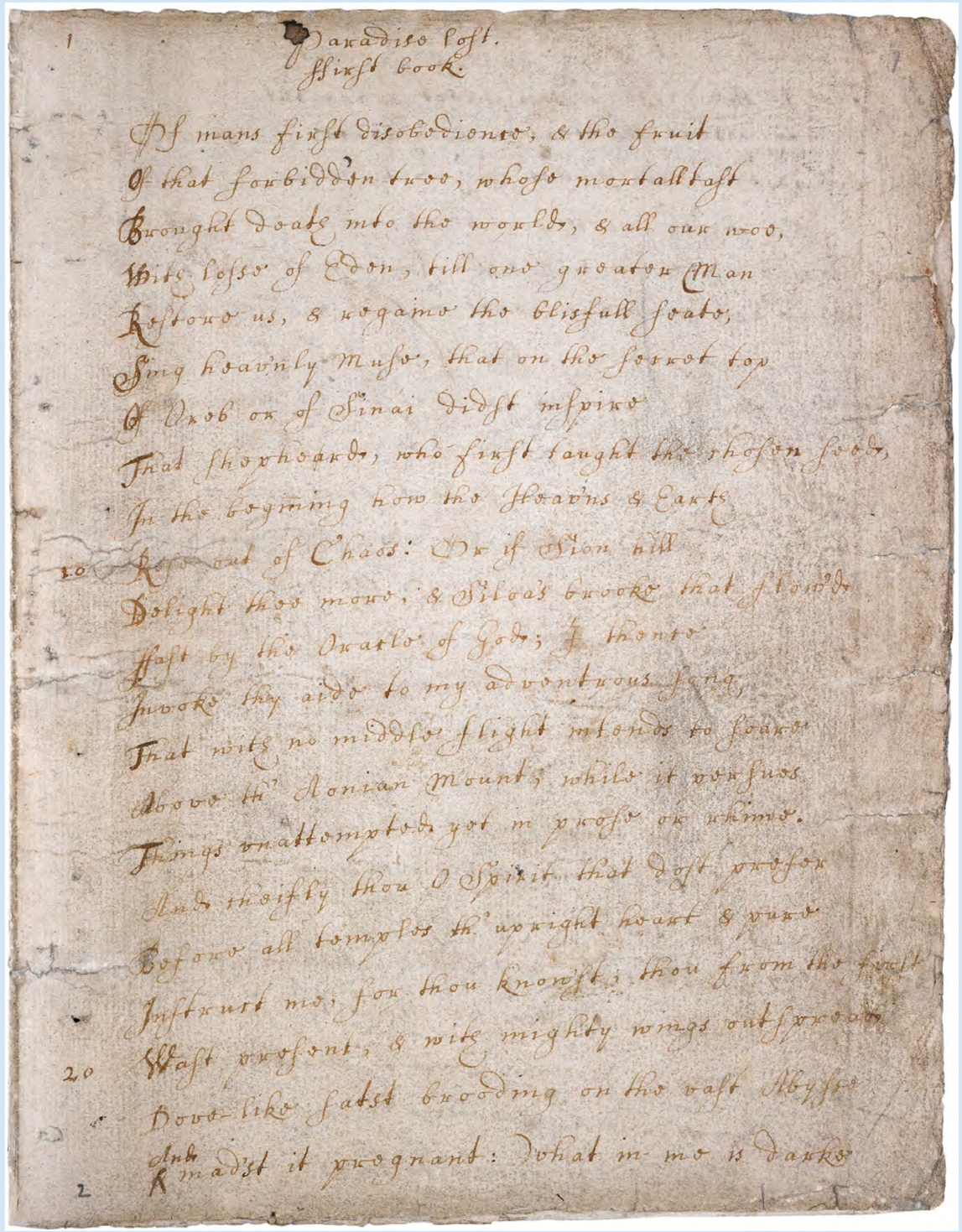
The publication of the epic *Paradise Lost* was delayed because of events including the Great Plague, the Second Anglo-Dutch War and the Great Fire of London. Milton composed the ten books of *Paradise Lost* between 1658 and 1663. The poem's narrative concerns the intertwined fates of Adam, Eve and Lucifer, and is widely regarded as one of the most important works of English literature. It has influenced the work of poets such as William Blake, Lord Byron and John Keats.

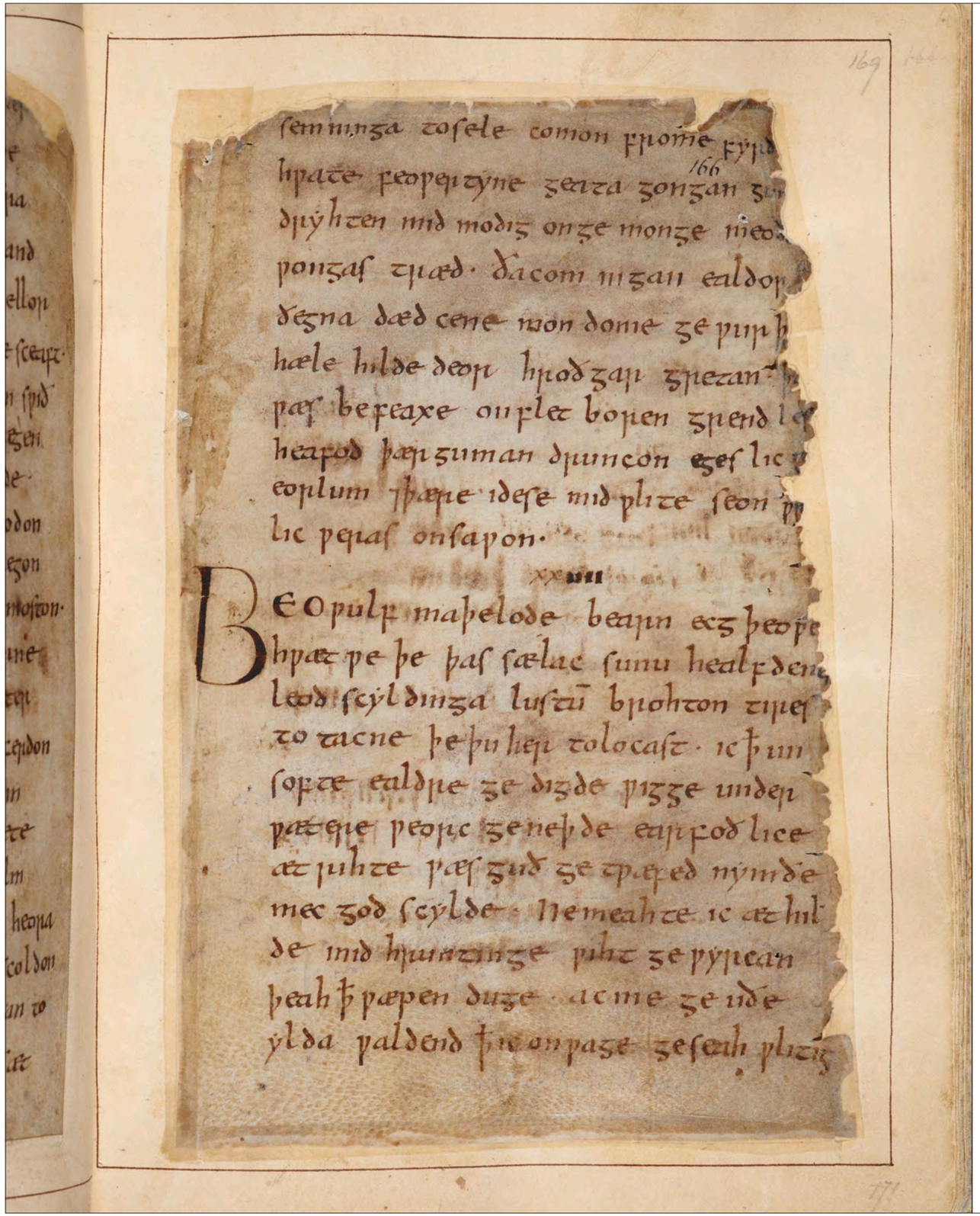
Having completely lost his sight by 1652, Milton relied heavily on scribes, both professional and from his family. He drafted in his mind, committing the words to memory, and then dictated sections of his work to his scribes. Only one surviving draft of *Paradise Lost* exists, and it is this thirty-three-page manuscript for Book 1 held at the Morgan Library & Museum. The manuscript is written in a single hand, probably that of a professional scribe, but is likely to have been copied from several earlier manuscripts. Milton corrected his work as it was read back to him, and this manuscript includes at least five different correcting hands. It probably survived because it became the printer's copy. The second folio which contains the opening scene is transcribed here.

Paradise Lost was sold to the printer Samuel Simmons for £5, and the original contract is held at the British Library. Dated 27 April 1667, it bears Milton's seal and a signature probably written by an amanuensis (literary assistant). The signatures were witnessed by John Fisher and Benjamin Greene, a servant to Milton. The contract states that Milton will receive another £5 once 1,300 copies have sold. Milton might have earned a further £10 had two more editions been published, but he died soon after the second edition was printed.

Paradise Lost.
ffirst book.

Of mans first disobedience, & the fruit
Of that forbidd'en tree, whose mortall tast
Brought death into the world, & all our woe,
With losse of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, & regaine the blisfull seate,
Sing heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb or of Sinai didst inspire
That shepheard, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the Heav'ns & Earth
Rose out of Chaos: Or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brooke that flow'd
Ffast by the Oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aide to my adventrous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soare
Above th' Aonian Mount; while it persues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhime.
And cheifly thou O Spirit that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart & pure
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present, & with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abysse,
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is darke





Beowulf

UNKNOWN

***c.*1000.** British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f.169r. Volume 24.5 × 18.5 cm; parchment leaves approximately 20.2 × 12 cm; paper frames 23.5 × 17 cm. Black ink on parchment.

This copy of *Beowulf* is remarkable, for it is the only surviving manuscript of the story. The manuscript is thought to be approximately 1,000 years old, and dates from the late tenth or early eleventh century. Some believe that the story, which was originally told orally, harks back to the sixth century and that it was first written down in the eighth century.

The manuscript of *Beowulf* was part of the collection of Sir Robert Cotton, which was bequeathed to the nation by his grandson Sir John Cotton in 1702. Under state ownership the collection was moved to Ashburnham House in Westminster for safekeeping. However, a fire broke out on 23 October 1731, which damaged many manuscripts and completely destroyed a few. *Beowulf* escaped the fire relatively intact but suffered greater loss through handling in the following years, as letters crumbled away from the outer portions of its pages. In 1753 the Cotton library formed one of the foundation collections of the newly established British Museum.

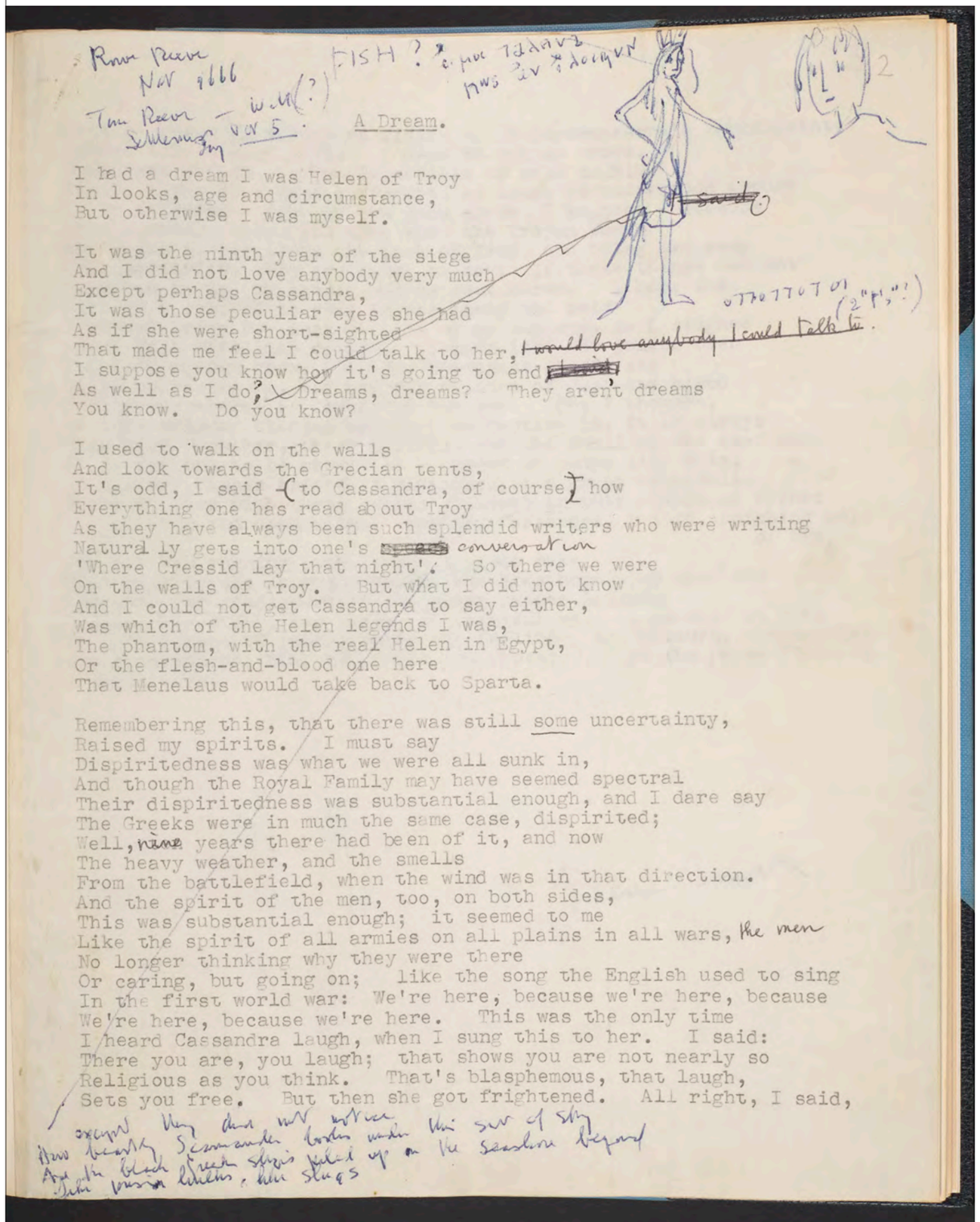
At more than 3,000 lines, *Beowulf* is the longest poem in Old English, the language spoken in Anglo-Saxon England. The story follows the feats of Beowulf, a prince of the Geats, who battles the monster Grendel and Grendel's vengeful mother. In this extract, Beowulf returns with Grendel's head and begins a speech to Hrothgar, high lord of the Scyldings, about his battle with Grendel's mother.

Fierce, keen in the hosting, a fourteen of men
Of the Geat-folk a-ganging; and with them their lord,
The moody amidst of the throng, trod the mead-plains;
Came then in a-wending the foreman of thanes,
The man keen of his deeds all beworshipp'd of doom,
The hero, the battle-deer, Hrothgar to greet.
Then was by the fell borne in onto the floor
Grendel's head, whereas men were a-drinking in hall,
Aweful before the earls, yea and the woman.
The sight wondrous to see the warriors there look'd on.

XXV (XIIII in original text) CONVERSE OF HROTHGAR WITH BEOWULF

Spake out then Beowulf, Ecgtheow's bairn:
What! we the sea-spoils here to thee, son of Healfdene,
High lord of the Scyldings, with lust have brought hither
For a token of glory, e'en these thou beholdest.
Now I all unsoftly with life I escaped,
In war under the water dar'd I the work
Full hard to be worked, and well-nigh there was
The sundering of strife, save that me God had shielded.
So it is that in battle naught might I with Hrunting
One whit do the work, though the weapon be doughty;
But to me then he granted, the Wielder of men,
That on wall I beheld there all beauteous hanging
An ancient sword might-endow'd (often he leadeth right
The friendless of men); so forth I drew that weapon.

Translated by William Morris and A. J. Wyatt,
The Tale of Beowulf sometime King of the Folk of the Weder Geats
(London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1910)



A Dream.

I had a dream I was Helen of Troy
In looks, age and circumstance,
But otherwise I was myself.

It was the ninth year of the siege
And I did not love anybody very much
Except perhaps Cassandra,
It was those peculiar eyes she had
As if she were short-sighted
That made me feel I could talk to her, I would love anybody I could talk to.
I suppose you know how it's going to end [illegible]
As well as I do? Dreams, dreams? They aren't dreams
You know. Do you know?

I used to walk on the walls
And look towards the Grecian tents,
It's odd, I said – (to Cassandra, of course) how
Everything one has read about Troy
As they have always been such splendid writers who were writing
Naturally gets into one's speach conversation
'Where Cressid lay that night'. So there we were
On the walls of Troy. But what I did not know
And I could not get Cassandra to say either,
Was which of the Helen legends I was,
The phantom, with the real Helen in Egypt,
Or the flesh-and-blood one here
That Menelaus would take back to Sparta.

Remembering this, that there was still some uncertainty,
Raised my spirits. I must say
Dispiritedness was what we were all sunk in,
And though the Royal Family may have seemed spectral
Their dispiritedness was substantial enough, and I dare say
The Greeks were in much the same case, dispirited;
Well, nine years there had been of it, and now
The heavy weather, and the smells
From the battlefield, when the wind was in that direction.
And the spirit of the men, too, on both sides,
This was substantial enough; it seemed to me
Like the spirit of all armies on all plains in all wars, the men
No longer thinking why they were there
Or caring, but going on; like the song the English used to sing
In the first world war: We're here, because we're here, because
We're here, because we're here. This was the only time
I heard Cassandra laugh, when I sung this to her. I said:
There you are, you laugh; that shows you are not nearly so
Religious as you think. That's blasphemous, that laugh,
Sets you free. But then she got frightened. All right, I said,

A Dream

STEVIE SMITH (1902–1971)

Before 1966. British Library, Add MS 53732, ff.2r–3r. Folio 25.2 × 20 cm.
Typescript on paper with blue and black ink annotations and illustrations.

Epic poetry has often been altered, updated and reworked by later poets into their own original poetry. Sometimes reverential, often questioning and even critical, poets shed their own light and understanding on these universal epics. The poet Florence Smith, who published under her nickname Stevie, was one such poet. Her poem 'A Dream' reimagines Homer's epic work the *Iliad* from the perspective of Helen of Troy.

Smith is known for the dark humour in her poetry and her accompanying quirky illustrations. Her typescript includes annotations, additional lines of poetry and a couple of drawings in ball-point pen, perhaps showing Helen of Troy herself. The British Library purchased this draft and four other poems from the Arts Council on 16 April 1966.

In 'A Dream' Smith places a twentieth-century narrator in Helen of Troy's shoes. This allows her to retell the story from a modern feminist perspective. Helen's lack of voice in the traditional story means that we only have a story created by men that cites her as the cause of a major war. Here the modern Helen explores the futility of the war and the horrors that await the combatants. She compares the senselessness of the conflict vividly to the First World War as depicted by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.

Smith also incorporates different versions of the story of Helen of Troy into 'A Dream'. In Homer's story Helen's elopement with Paris leads to the Trojan War and her role in the story is primarily as the beautiful woman who caused a dispute between men. An alternative version, associated with the Greek poet Stesichorus, suggests that Proteus, disguised as an Egyptian King, held Helen in Egypt while Zeus sent Paris to Troy with an *eidolon* (phantom or wraith) of Helen.

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In looks, age and circumstance,
But otherwise I was myself.

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Except perhaps Cassandra,
It was those peculiar eyes she had
As if she were short-sighted
That made me feel I could talk to her, ~~I would love anybody I could talk to.~~
I suppose you know how it's going to end [~~illegible~~]
As well as I do? Dreams, dreams? They aren't dreams
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And look towards the Grecian tents,
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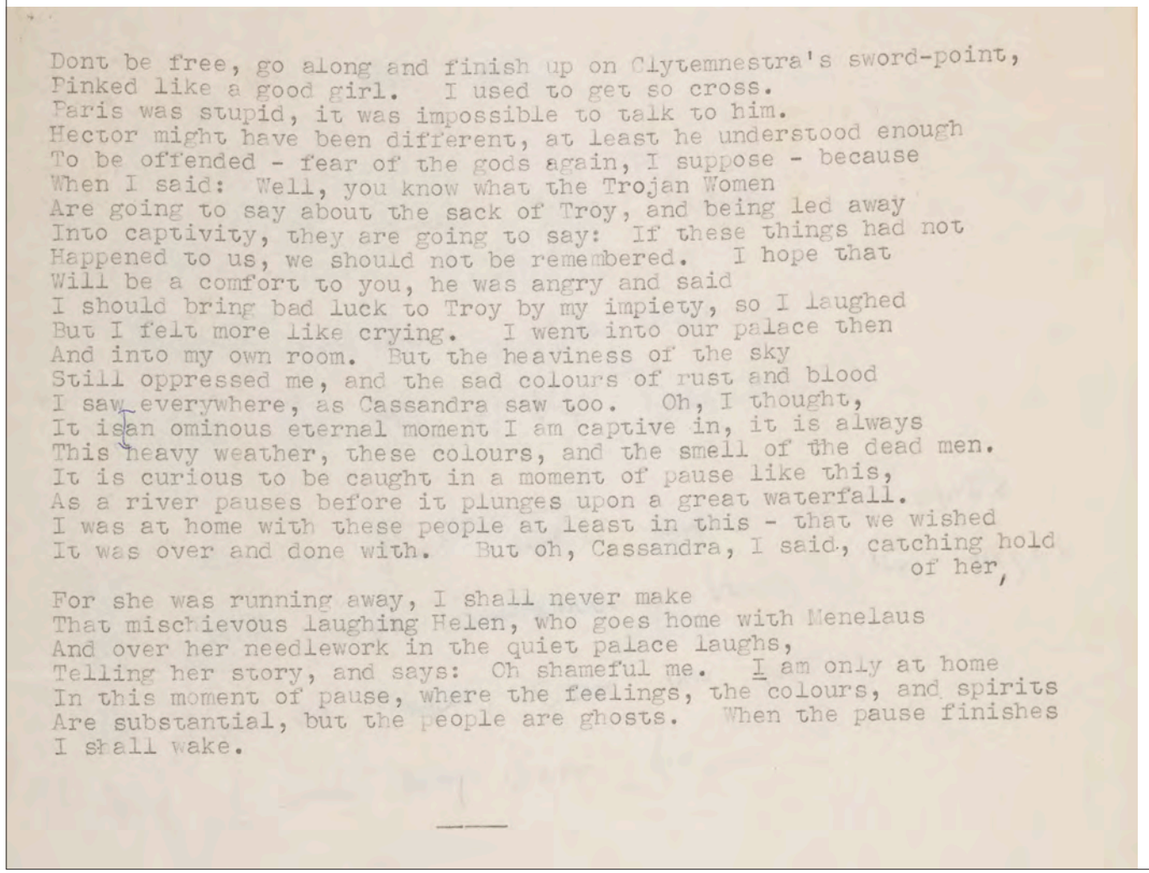
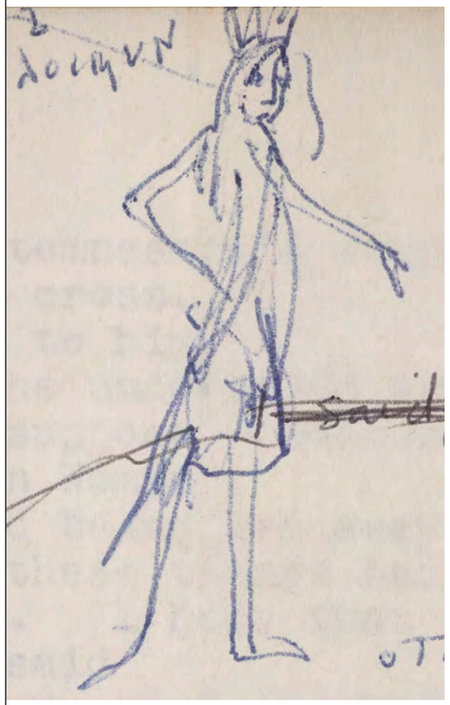


Dont be free, go along and finish up on Clytemnestra's sword-point,
Pinked like a good girl. I used to get so cross.
Paris was stupid, it was impossible to talk to him.
Hector might have been different, at least he understood enough
To be offended - fear of the gods again, I suppose - because
When I said: Well, you know what the Trojan Women
Are going to say about the sack of Troy, and being led away
Into captivity, they are going to say: If these things had not
Happened to us, we should not be remembered. I hope that
Will be a comfort to you, he was angry and said
I should bring bad luck to Troy by my impiety, so I laughed
But I felt more like crying. I went into our palace then
And into my own room. But the heaviness of the sky
Still oppressed me, and the sad colours of rust and blood
I saw everywhere, as Cassandra saw too. Oh, I thought,
It isan ominous eternal moment I am captive in, it is always
This heavy weather, these colours, and the smell of the dead men.
It is curious to be caught in a moment of pause like this,
As a river pauses before it plunges upon a great waterfall.
I was at home with these people at least in this - that we wished
It was over and done with. But oh, Cassandra, I said, catching hold
of her,

For she was running away, I shall never make
That mischievous laughing Helen, who goes home with Menelaus
And over her needlework in the quiet palace laughs,
Telling her story, and says: Oh shameful me. I am only at home
In this moment of pause, where the feelings, the colours, and spirits
Are substantial, but the people are ghosts. When the pause finishes
I shall wake.



There you are, you laugh; that shows you are not nearly so
Religious as you think. That's blasphemous, that laugh,
Sets you free. But then she got frightened. All right, I said,
except they did not notice
How beastly Scamander looks under this sort of sky
And the black Greek ships piled up on the seashore beyond
Like prison hulks, like slugs

Don't be free, go along and finish up on Clytemnestra's sword-point,
Pinked like a good girl. I used to get so cross.
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I shall wake.

Stevie Smith

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

SIMON ARMITAGE

I find it very peculiar looking back at drafts of poems. The hurried scribbles and 'organic' spellings look very naïve in retrospect, and miles away from the finished poems with their manicured typography and livery of printed text. But it reminds me why I encourage students to write by hand, so they can see the archaeology of their efforts and recognise how much revision is necessary. This is one of the most famous passages in the original poem, Gawain's journey into the unknown as he searches for the Green Knight and the Green Chapel of his destiny. After several false starts at the beginning of the project I'd got some momentum going by this time, and was beginning to find a satisfying orchestration of rhyme, rhythm and alliteration. There are many moving parts in the poem, to do with its rules and formulas, and translating it occasionally felt like puzzling over a long, elaborate word game. The first version of each line would have been a literal translation of the middle English, the second version an attempt to give it some meaning and grammatical cohesion, and the third version a hopeful stab at transforming lumps of raw language into the thing we call poetry.