

## Earle Birney's Radio Dramas Based on Medieval Texts

by M.J. Toswell

During World War II, Earle Birney served overseas as a personnel selection officer<sup>1</sup> (he described himself as a “psychological Valkyrie”),<sup>2</sup> being invalided home in 1945. Rather than returning to his rather parlous temporary position as lecturer at the University of Toronto, he accepted a job at the Montreal office of the CBC as Supervisor of the European Section of their International Service. The job was not a success, and Birney was delighted when he obtained a permanent appointment at the University of British Columbia starting in September 1946. However, the CBC job paid one very large dividend. It introduced Birney to radio as a medium, as a way for a poet to reach a large audience and to facilitate the exchange of ideas, and it provided him with the rudimentary technical knowledge to embark, over the next few years, on a sideline of writing radio plays.

For Birney, the public role of the poet was of paramount importance. In the memoir *Spreading Time*, which consists of Birney's choice of his articles and notes with headnotes explicating their autobiographical and national context, Birney states that

[F]rom the beginnings of man's history, the art of poetry has been an art of oration as well as of transcription. Poetry is composed for the ear; it is written down in order to be preserved; but it can only be fully enjoyed and transmitted by the blessed sound of the human voice.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in 1949, in an article entitled “Poetry Is An Oral Art: Poets Should Hire A Hall,” Birney proposes:

[T]he main thing is not to sell people books but to ensure that they *listen* to you. The great tradition of verbal poetry is a tradition of verbal music, of words arranged to be heard as well as seen.<sup>4</sup>

These heartfelt declarations confirm that for Birney the public role of the poet as speaker to the nation was the first and most important consideration. At the same time that he was writing and publishing these statements about the need to hear as well as see poetry, to regard the poet as a verbal performer, Birney was also putting his theory into practice. In addition to

the very frequent readings he gave throughout his life, he also wrote radio plays. He could, with their production, be heard by a whole nation of people.

The chronology and dramaturgy of these plays is not wholly clear; some are also lost. One at least seems deservedly gone; in a letter which according to Birney's pencilled note on the copy in the Fisher Rare Book Library was written in 1950, Birney states that he has written one called "The Teeth of Laurella" that is a "stinkaroo" so bad that his wife won't type it for him. On the other hand, he goes on to give some details and ask if his interlocutor (Robert Allen, producer of all but one or two of Birney's plays) would nonetheless like to see it.<sup>5</sup> The reply does not survive, but since there is no further mention of the play, presumably an original one by Birney, it will remain a mystery. The first of the plays, only fifteen minutes in length, was the folk-tale "Johnny Dunn & the Wolves," produced in 1945 and now lost. The second was an original play by Birney based on his wartime experiences; entitled "Court-Martial," it was 30 minutes in length, performed on 3 October 1946.<sup>6</sup> A second and much larger set of plays was performed in 1950, starting with *Beowulf*. According to Birney's notes, the text was based on his translation of 1928, done for a *Beowulf* course with Arthur G. Brodeur at Berkeley. The version produced in April 1950 was revised, quite heavily, for publication in 1985, and it also required extensive consultation over the layout. There was some discussion of setting it in verse with a caesura, but Birney's preference and that of Quarry Press was for leaving it in "rhythmic prose form," the hope being that the "general audience" for the volume "would find it less intimidating, easier to read, even more enjoyable in rhythmic prose form."<sup>7</sup>

In short order, in the fall of 1950, the CBC produced Birney's versions of Frank Stockton's "The Griffin & the Minor Canon" (29 September 1950), Robert Louis Stevenson's short story "Markheim" under the title "Murder in the Pawnshop" (7 November 1950), Pushkin's "The Undertaker" as "A Party at the Undertaker's" (14 November 1950), Turgenev's "The District Doctor" as "The Case of Dr. Trifon" (21 November 1950), and Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades" (28 November 1950). All were half-hour productions: the cream of the crop, performed at Birney's request at the New Year, specifically on 3 January 1951 as a winter's solstice celebration, was *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a full hour in length and produced for the prestigious Wednesday Night Series. A second medieval-inspired play entitled the "Third Shepherds' Play," written according to Birney in July 1950, was never produced by the CBC, having been rejected by what Birney would call the mandarins back east, "for alleged blas-

phemy.”<sup>8</sup> Howard Fink has a more measured assessment, suggesting that the decision not to translate the medieval mystery play but to recreate the spirit of the original may not have been a good one. The anti-capitalist rant of one of the shepherds implies a social message that was less prominent in the original, and perhaps, Fink comes close to implying, means that Birney shifts gear too wrenchingly from the mundane world of the shepherds “to the Angelic.”<sup>9</sup> In any case, the play was never produced.

Birney turned to longer and more ambitious projects for his next three productions, including a ninety-minute version of Conrad’s novella “The Duel” for which Birney also provided a thirty-minute introduction to the history of the duel. The CBC did a second ninety-minute play by Birney on 8 October 1952, his original “The Damnation of Vancouver.” The play explores the deterioration of Birney’s beloved city, even bringing Piers Plowman in to deliver his impressions of the squalor and misery of Vancouver. The city is saved by the testimony of Mrs. Anyone, whose simple belief that the Minister of History should give the city another chance prevails. The play had a previous incarnation as a poem “Trial of a City” (not Birney’s choice of title), and was revised many times over the next three decades, obtaining some popularity as a play. Finally, some years later, Birney’s last adaptation for radio was “Piers Plowman,” also ninety minutes in length. The CBC commissioned the adaptation in May 1956, and it was produced in November 1957. Birney also did some improvisational work with Oscar Peterson and with Alexander Brott Sr., both of whom took poems chosen by Birney and wrote musical pieces that responded to the poems. This became a thread that Birney would pick up in the 70s, when he worked with the jazz group Nexus, among others, to develop musical-poetic presentations. However, although Birney himself listed these improvisations among his radio plays, they do not seem strictly relevant.

For my purposes here, then, and in Birney’s own first account of his radio plays, the significant pieces are the renditions of *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the abortive “Third Shepherds’ Play,” *Piers Plowman*, and the appearance of Long Will of Langland in Birney’s original play *The Damnation of Vancouver*.

# I

The first of these, and the first of Birney’s medieval adaptations, is fittingly *Beowulf*. The radio-play has a narrator, a warrior who introduces an appropriate setting for the delivery of the poem—a chieftain’s hall in Yorkshire the night before the tribe heads off to attack the Picts in the north—and sets

up the tuning of the harp and the shield-clash which mark the beginning of the recitation. The scop starts at the beginning of the poem:

(VERY STRONG) Shining Chief, Shield of Warriors! Sword-wielders! Beer-comrades All! Once lived a lord of the Spear-Danes, Hrothgar (HUH-WROATH-GAR) his name, noble of heart. Raised he a high wall like unto this, mighty mead-dwelling for weal of his warriors, for feasting & harp-song, and to deal out freely what bounty luck brought him. Herrot he called it, and tall it towered. Within moved his warrior band in mirth and in fullness. Till a dread fiend of darkness, a haunter of moors, heard of their halljoy. (*Words on Waves* 4)<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Birney does not use his modernised Anglo-Saxon prosody here. There are hints of alliteration, and the syntax is dense, with inversions of Subject-Verb order to Verb-Subject for archaism, and the use of an arcane lexicon. However, Birney keeps the sentences very short and rather staccato in effect, makes each clause substantially advance the action; he also keeps the tone brisk and the plot moving quickly. There are no explanatory analyses, nothing even of the sly hinting of the *Beowulf*-poet as to the possible cause and effect relationship between the building of Heorot and the arrival of Grendel. This is narrative, with occasional adjectives (“noble,” “mighty,” “dread”) for atmosphere.

The story advances briskly, with spells and death-wails in the background and the scop’s narrative in the foreground, until Beowulf speaks to Hrothgar, offering to “purge Herrot for thee” (5). Beowulf succeeds in his goal, and there rises in Heorot “a grisly howl” (7). Hrothgar offers gifts, including a sword, the “work of old elves” (7—a mistaken translation),<sup>11</sup> and they feast. Grendel’s mother attacks “howling where the jewelled Spear-Danes slept” (8), and Beowulf seeks her out in “the cold tarn” (8). There he succeeds in throwing her off, wresting her sword from her, and cutting through her neck-bone with it (9). The scop rapidly narrates the ensuing treasure-giving, Beowulf’s return home, and his succession as chief of the “Gayats” (trying to get the pronunciation of the Geats correct in the English mode), “Lord of the Storm-Leeds” (10). Fifty years later the third section of the play opens with “Flame roar, steam hiss, scaly rattle” and the dragon, disturbed by the theft of a goblet, awakens from its 300-year sleep. One of Birney’s more self-consciously poetic passages ensues:

Took then to air that scaly fire-breather, flew flaming in night sky. Spurred fire-gleed on farmstead, went vaulting over vallies, bereft them of life. At daybreak winged back to welter in treasure-cave waiting the darkness.

Streamed forth under stars again, glided far as the Gayat towers, scorched  
Beowulf's bower with breath-flame. (11)

Birney omits the pronoun, understood as starting each sentence, and engages in archaic usages with “fire-gleed” for a spark or “welter” as a verb. The Anglo-Saxonism calling Beowulf’s hall his “bower” does not, perhaps, strike the right note, a case in which etymological fealty may be a mistake.

Nonetheless, Beowulf sallies forth to battle the dragon. He has ruled fifty years, but he remains the sole defender of his people and climbs the cliff until he sees the dragon’s smoke and challenges the beast. The dragon emerges and Beowulf’s sword can do little damage. One resolute thane, Wiglaf, steps forward to help and, when the dragon is occupied (“his fangs clamped all his neck” 13) with Beowulf, thrusts deep between the scales. Beowulf uses what Birney calls his “dirk” (13) to finish off the dragon, but has been mortally wounded himself. He recapitulates his life and accomplishments, and names Wiglaf as heir and successor. On Wiglaf’s instructions the Geats build a funeral pyre to burn Beowulf and the tainted gold (another loose end neatly tied up). The final statement by the *scop* starts with a translation of the last lines of the poem, then expands into Birney’s most extensive addition:

Said they that Beowulf was of all mankind the boldest of heart and greatest  
in handgrip; was to his folk the mildest of men yet worthiest ever of praise.  
Said they at end that his leave-taking fitted him, that he fell in grim foe-play,  
shielding his folk, and greatness grasping, in eld as in youth.

Was that a good end, for no man can dwell always with kinsmen in the high  
hall or go deed-faring forever in the day-world of light.

It will be clear from this summary that Birney’s interest focuses on the broad brush-strokes of the narrative. Three sections, three monsters, three battles, three speaking characters (Beowulf, Hrothgar, Wiglaf): these are the balance-points of the play. Beowulf is a hero throughout, his motives the purest and most dignified. The poem is a simple tale of heroism leading to kingship, and acceptance of the duties of rule in the most manly and courageous way. Much of the complexity, especially of the ending, of the original disappears. Birney’s *Beowulf* is also a purely pagan text, with Hrothgar thanking Othir and Fraya (Odin and Freya) for Beowulf’s success in battle, and Beowulf referring on several occasions to Hild, not *hild* meaning “battle” but a goddess personifying War who may, and in the end does, take

him for herself. Christianity disappears, and with it another layer of complexity in the poem. Also gone is the multivalent sense of history and memory in the text, the elegiac uncertainty about the human condition that is so fundamental to the poem as we have it.

There are very good explanations for all these alterations. One is that a half-hour radio drama has to hit the high points and focus only on central narrative incidents. Another is that a long poem shifts to a radio play only in a heavily mediated state, and the parameters of the mediation require this amount of textual disruption. Another is that in the difficult postwar years, a simple narrative, with the appearance of deriving from British history, in which a hero defeats his foes, effortlessly, then effortfully, then with such difficulty that he needs help and is himself mortally wounded: such a narrative would provide a healing message linking the sorrowful aftermath of war in the present day to a glorious past in which the hero prevails but also suffers. Yet another explanation is that Birney was searching for heroes—in “David,” in his short poem modifying Anglo-Saxon metre “Anglosaxon Street” where he finds antiheroes; and in his lifelong restless wanderings and choices. He found in *Beowulf* what he wanted to find: an indomitable hero facing impossible odds and still succeeding. Fourthly, the state of *Beowulf* scholarship has changed since 1950; Birney’s representation may be close to the thinking of Anglo-Saxonists such as his teacher Alfred Brodeur, and the pagan/Christian question is and always has been a deeply vexed issue in thinking about the poem. Most likely, of course, is that Birney’s *Beowulf* the radio drama was a product of several impulses, almost certainly conflicting, and the disjunctures that result from the translation process are the effect of a text placed under almost unbearable stress.

More intriguing to an Anglo-Saxonist are the several small details which Birney seems to get wrong. He describes the dragon as having been in a three-hundred-year sleep, when the Old English poem simply has him having found and remained with the treasure-hoard (and seen it as his own) for three hundred years. Birney’s *Beowulf* climbs a cliff towards the dragon’s barrow, which may be what is implied in the Old English, but is not quite what is said. He names Wiglaf as his heir and successor as chief, and orders that the treasure be burnt with his body in the funeral-pyre, which is very definitely not what the poem has: *Beowulf* names Wiglaf as his personal heir, the last of the Wægmundings, but he does not have the power to name him chief in a Germanic—and particularly a somewhat Anglo-Saxon—context. And in the original poem *Beowulf* explicitly and at some length perceives the treasure as something that can be used for the advantage of his people, something he has bought with his life; it is the

Geats who dispose of the treasure because they see it as nothing but a liability which will speed their destruction at the hands of the Swedes and other tribes. All these particular difficulties with the translation are in the last third of the poem; Birney studied lines 1-1650 as a graduate student with Arthur Brodeur, and while there are perhaps archaisms, minor variances, or changes in scholarly perception with respect to that part of his work, there are no translation points with which to quibble. Thus, for example, Birney has Grendel's mother taking Beowulf to the ground and essentially sitting on top of him—"hag bestrode him, stabbed with bale-knife at Beowulf's byrnie" (9)—some Anglo-Saxonists now believe that the *onsæt* of the original poem, meaning "to sit upon" so that Grendel's mother sat on him to attempt to finish him off with her knife through his corslet at his neck, really should be translated as "to set upon" so that she simply attacked again, trying to get through.<sup>12</sup> The recognisable problems with the translation appear to come in the second half of the poem, the section after the one studied in Birney's graduate class.

There are also slight liberties that derive from Birney's preferred interpretation of the poem. Beowulf here wrests the sword from Grendel's mother, when in the poem he is sorely beset and on the ground having broken his own sword, and seizes from the wall of the cave a massive sword with runic inscriptions referring to biblical tales of the Old Testament to kill Grendel's mother. After she is dead, her blood on the sword melts the blade, though the markings on the hilt allow Hrothgar to deliver a long Christian sermon (very definitely not in Birney's adaptation). Beowulf's war-cry is also intriguing as he attacks the dragon (certainly for radio drama the only way to go into battle is to say something appropriate and have an ensuing clang of sword on shield); he cries "Seeg-uh Beowulf Way-der Gay-at-as Seeg!"(11), and repeats the cry. This is *Sige Weder-Geatas sige*, or "victory to the Weder-Geats (Beowulf's tribe), victory." Though Beowulf does not make this challenge, it is not at all an unlikely line. Finally, Birney wants to add and to subtract at the end. The last half-line of the poem is, famously, *lofgeornost* "most eager for praise," and this is the final verdict on Beowulf's life. It is not an automatically critical verdict, since heroes do engage in their exploits for praise, and wanting to be acknowledged for one's work is not a bad thing. However, there is certainly a strong hint of criticism of Beowulf, which many critics think casts doubt on his decision to fight the dragon, having ruled the Geats for fifty years (so he must have been at least 75 years old). Birney, however, buries the translation back a few lines as "worthiest ever of praise" (thereby avoiding the issue) and adds a few elegiac (and perfectly appropriate since

the last thousand lines of the poem are frequently called an extended elegy) remarks to close the broadcast.

Although Howard Fink argues that Birney's adaptation of *Piers Plowman* was his most significant drama, the Birney files hold many redrafts and evidence of tinkering with details of the language of *Beowulf*. It clearly held a special place in Birney's heart. Even in the early 1980s, thirty years after the play had been produced, Birney was making alterations. Those acquainted with Old English, and especially with the particular challenge of *Beowulf*, will appreciate how remarkable it is that Birney kept reconsidering his version of the poem. His archives include his own translation of *Beowulf* lines 1-1650 (ending at the death of Grendel's mother), and his notes from Brodeur's lectures—especially on matters prosodic.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere the archives include many notes from lectures Birney gave, especially on Old English and exams that he set, but not many of the notes he took in his own graduate courses. Given some more recent versions, it has to be said that his text remained true to his vision of what actually happened in the poem and projected that vision in very direct and powerful ways. His sense of fidelity to the original is powerful indeed. (Howard Fink, though he does not say it explicitly, clearly feels that this works against the success of the text as a radio drama since it requires such a level of decoding the text by the listener.) Perhaps one other clue to the importance of *Beowulf* in Birney's work is available: his underrated poem "Oil Refinery" elaborates a careful comparison with the old Beowulf battling the dragon, in one of Birney's more impassioned commitments to the pure importance of human courage.

## II

Birney seems to have grasped the essential elements of radio drama very quickly and almost instinctively. Radio drama was a relatively young art form; the first play specifically commissioned for radio was in England in 1925 (Parker 24), but its heyday came with the Third Programme just after the war, which aimed to be mind-stretching fare and commissioned young dramatists (including Harold Pinter, Dylan Thomas, Tom Stoppard, Fay Weldon, and Samuel Beckett) to produce material for this exciting new medium. Adaptations of short stories and novels were also commissioned, and many plays were staged. By the end of the war, according to Val Gielgud (Productions Director of the BBC's Drama Department and later Drama Director), three to four hundred plays per year were being produced, and authors were being specifically advised that they must write for

the microphone. As benefits Gielgud cites the intimacy of speech, the lack of boundaries between acts and scenes, the ability to stimulate the imagination with words, music, and sound, the ability to range through space and time, and the revivification of the “aside,” which could be restored to usage by radio. Gielgud argues that the microphone is “even more suited than the theatre to the presentation of characters and situations which the audience can easily identify with its own experience” (Gielgud 89). Gielgud also points out that the production of radio drama was an international activity, and one that became even more adventurous after the introduction of television. Robert Hilliard refers to radio as the art of the imagination, noting that “[t]he radio writer is restricted only by the breadth and depth of the mind’s eye of the audience. The writer has complete freedom of time and place. He or she is not limited by what can be presented visually” (Hilliard 207). In other words, he concludes, the medium of radio provides wide aesthetic flexibility. Thus, for example, although the heyday of radio drama was certainly during the 50s and early 60s, an oddball production such as Douglas Adams’ *Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* began as a radio program in 1978 (Lewis 1). Adventurous material is more than possible on radio, and is generally quite inexpensive to produce.

Medieval material for radio drama, which is certainly adventurous, seems to have been relatively common everywhere. Gielgud cites in particular a series of seven plays by Miss Clemence Dane entitled *The Savours* which presents the legend of Arthur through English history and has in his view escaped the attention which was its due. Louis MacNeice produced two dramas of Norse sagas: *The Burning of Njal* and *Grettir the Strong* (Drakakis 37-71). Morality plays were presented as well in the attempt to produce a British “national theatre of the air,” including D.G. Bridson’s *Aaron’s Field*, and Dorothy Sayers’s play-cycle *The Man Born To Be King*, which partook of the direct language of the medieval mystery plays (Drakakis 11-12). According to the more scholarly and measured account of Kate Whitehead, Nevill Coghill’s famous translation of the *Canterbury Tales*, not specifically a radio drama but certainly a reading translation for an audience, was also commissioned by the BBC’s Third Programme (Whitehead 128). Poets in particular were interested in radio in England. The poetry programme had three editors, all from Oxford. C. Day Lewis argued that radio was an ideal medium for the poet which should be exploited, and he made great use of the opportunity himself (Whitehead 159).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, American network programs demonstrate interest in matters medieval and poetic: in the summer of 1950 a syndicated anthology series aired, in seven episodes, the story of the *Canterbury Tales*

(Grams 54-5). Birney might well have been aware of these productions in particular, since although there is some evidence in his files that he planned to tackle Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (which might make a very interesting radio drama), he never seems to have planned to do the Chaucer texts he knew best from his own thesis on the Tales.

Unsurprisingly, the only readily-available history of the CBC, which makes very little reference to radio drama, is entitled *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Raboy). Raboy argues that broadcasting in Canada was one of the privileged arenas of struggle over conflicting and competing notions of Canadian society, the Canadian nation, and the Canadian public. During the period between 1949 and 1958, Raboy suggests that the national needs of the country were gradually subsumed as private concerns appropriated the public sphere. This led to crisis in the next generation (and several thereafter). Nonetheless, Birney seems to have found a relatively receptive audience for his efforts at the CBC. While his previous job might have given him some ideas, he still had to learn how to write radio plays. Arthur Asa Berger starts with the obvious: "Scripts rely upon the power of dialogue" (Berger 7), before advising that the rule for writing for the ear (which he capitalizes) is to keep it simple, use a lively manner, be mindful of flow, use action verbs, use repetition carefully and teasers and hooks in moderation, and have a strong closing. It is also worth using sound material of various kinds to help. Birney seems to have known all that already, as evidenced in his adaptation of *Beowulf*. Other writers about radio drama are perhaps more philosophical: Andrew Crisell refers to the way in which radio bears a resemblance to imaginative literature as it does to the conventional theatre (Crisell 161), and notes the fundamentally nihilistic tendency of radio. A character who is introduced and does not speak, or does not speak frequently, wholly disappears from view unless the other characters (never more than five or six since large casts are not possible) constantly refer to that character. Crisell posits that radio is a restricted auditory field—shouts and whispers cannot be real shouts and whispers, but are achieved only through very careful dramatic contrast—and also proposes that the fundamental feature of radio is ostension. We are shown something, we register the activities through what we hear, and our imaginations fill in the spaces. Even sounds, which for some are just standard props, fall in a relativized continuum since one sound may mean one thing in a drama of the sea (a clap of thunder) and another in a crowded streetscape (the same clap marking a quick fender-bender or, if the action turns in that direction, a shot-gun blast). Context is all in radio.

The context may well have been the problem for the next radio play by Birney to be considered, one which was never broadcast. Birney considered that CBC bureaucrats assessed his "Third Shepherds' Play" as too salacious for broadcasting. It was written in the spirit of the medieval mystery play known as the "Second Shepherd's Play" and familiar to many undergraduates for its burlesque moments in which a lamb is used to stand in for a baby (with disastrous results for the conniving shepherd and his wife who attempt the deception, having stolen the lamb from the local shepherders). It is equally likely that they found the piece too polemic, too obviously socialist and rather prone to preaching. In fact, though Birney calls this a third Shepherd's play, it is not at all far from the original. Birney has Mac and Gill making remarks about their "baby" as "lambkins" and Gill saying "Before God, I'd as soon we ate this child in its crib as steal anything from you" (143). However, the piece is set in the modern day in British Columbia's Caribou District, with lots of slang and comments about income tax and the need for a union; this means that the sudden shift at the end, in which a real Lamb is born, since the Second Shepherd's Play is part of the nativity cycle in the mystery plays, is particularly shocking. The Son of God is described as having been born at Vanderhoof (which might well be as unlikely for British Columbia as Bethlehelem was for the Jews, but it still strikes the ear poorly). Finally, the three shepherds, after tossing Mac in a blanket (which follows the medieval play closely), borrow his speeder to take along the train tracks in order to get to Vanderhoof (which does not follow the source). The play is perhaps most interesting for its use of BC dialect, both lexically and phonologically (references to "sangwitches" for "sandwiches," for example).

Birney was certainly experimenting with the best ways to bring this medieval material into the modern living room with radio broadcasts. Whereas for the purist his *Beowulf* works fairly well, it may well not work as radio since it has to do too many things at once and loses the drama of consciousness, the psychological study which may work best on radio (that is, perhaps more of *Beowulf*'s agonized soliloquies/monologues about what was happening in his homeland might have been worthwhile). Similarly, while this shepherd's play stays very close to its inspiration, some of the elements used to make it more readily accessible are too jarring; Christian iconography is very difficult to restructure.

## III

With *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Birney found another option, and perhaps a more successful one. Since the essence of radio, as discussed above, is dialogue—something that was very difficult to bring to *Beowulf* but flowed very smoothly in the revision of a mystery play—here Birney needed a ploy to create dialogue. He found it by bringing Gawain in as the central narrator, and telling the story largely in the first person. This meant that the frame narrative of an ordinary person discussing the background of the story with the author could be interrupted by a character anxious (something rather reminiscent of modern drama, in fact) to get the story started. The exchange of blows scene at the beginning works because Birney expands Guinevere's role, and Arthur's too, and by having Gawain do the description of the Green Knight he is able to present both the image of that strange and wonderful being and also Gawain's reaction to it (thereby creating the drama of consciousness at the centre of good radio):

Gawain: And the fearsomest knight that ever man beheld paced on strangest steed into our feasting midst. Giant-like was the stranger, great of back and breast, yet supple withal, not merry to meet by twilight. Yet more wondrous even than his might was his weird hue: from his long curled locks and tumbling beard to the emerald in each tapering shoe-tip he was green, sea-green in raiment, and ink-green of hair and skin. Green-dyed was the fur upon his peerless mantle and his hanging hood, and powdered with emerald stars all his bright silken straps. Like jasper was his saddle, set off with silver bridle-bells. Even his bright spurs glowed like the green in the heart of a lightning flash. Nor was that all. His horse, as big-boned and deep-thewed as its master, was coloured like the grass, e'en to his mane and tail, fresh-combed and cunningly with gold thread blended. So mazed were all in the high hall we sat as still as hooded hawks, or as we had been wrenched from this world wondrously away to look on things of faëry. Nor helm nor shield the strange knight bore, nor lance nor heraldry, but high in an arm that like a young tree rose from out his spreading beard's great april bush, he bore a glistening holly spray with berries red. (*Words on Waves* 23)

Birney does not get all the details of the original here, but he certainly gets most of them, along with a strong sense of the alliteration that was the bed-rock of the fourteenth-century poem. His language is a kind of Victorian writer meets Mark Twain, but with no abstractions—just pure description of the Green Knight as he brings a game to the court of King Arthur, a game in which he will withstand one blow of his axe to the neck, and his protagonist will withstand one blow of the same axe a year hence. After

Gawain obtains the chance and strikes his blow, Gawain himself describes the ensuing moments: “His body neither fell nor faltered but—my marrow freezes now in thinking of it—groping with one still leaf-green hand, the other bearing still the holly bush (now gleaming brighter red) that headless giant walked blindly searching for his head, stooped, clutched, and caught it by its gory hair” (27).

The eerie journey as Gawain searches is difficult to present, and Birney does not use music or other sound effects to back Gawain’s voice as he describes his departure and quest. However, the court of what turns out to be the Green Knight comes alive, and the exchanges between Gawain and his host are very crisp, clear and exuberant. Since Gawain tells the tale, he is also able to give his first swooning impressions of the Knight’s Lady, and to establish his love for the unreachable wife of his host. Thus, the bedroom exchanges are poignant and somewhat indirect, the hunting exchanges boisterous and very realistic. For example, on the third day:

Eglantyne: Lo how thou sleepest when I, who love thee above all men, can find no rest from my heart’s wound.

Gawain: Sweet, lady, there’s naught to say or do.

Eglantyne: Then thou hast other love with eyes of lovelier hue.

Gawain (*Laughing wryly*): Nay, I know none nor none will know.

Eglantyne: Then love me, love me now, who love thee true!

Gawain: O my sweet, thou knowest I love thee—but, by all the chaste vows of the Table Round, and by my honour as thy husband’s guest, I will not more than—say I love thee.

Eglantyne: Then lovest thou more thy honour.

Gawain: So be it. (42-3)

Interestingly, Birney here avoids any salacious (and thoroughly medieval) interpretations by turning the green girdle of the fourteenth-century poem into a green riband from the lady’s wrist (although the Bercilak figure later refers to it as a waistband). Also gone is the background of the tale, with Morgan le Fay attempting to try and prove false the court of Arthur. However, the humanity of Gawain’s failure comes through very clearly; Birney does not blame Gawain for saving his life, which means that the bitter and remorseful Gawain of the end of the poem disappears in favour of a kind of reconstruction of the Green Knight as the embodiment of the pagan solstice, the stock-taking at the end of the old year and beginning of the new one. He says himself, in Birney’s version: “Some call me Fate, some Conscience, yet I am more. Say Human Life, if in that word you compass also Human Death. But best, I think, to call me as I name myself, the Green

Knight of the Chapel Green.” As with *Beowulf*, much of the ambiguous complexity of the original is gone, but the plot remains along with a well-considered explanation of the themes. Interestingly, Birney in some ways plays up the background of sort-of Christianity in the text, emphasizing the bells for Mass that separate Gawain from the Lady during their trysts, and mentioning the Christian symbolism of Gawain’s shield, but his dedication of the quest to Mary is gone. The uncertain shift from pagan to Christian imagery does reflect the original very well.

#### IV

Nonetheless, Birney’s strongest radio drama based on a medieval text is probably *Piers Plowman*, and interestingly for this text he takes the greatest liberties with the plot (such as it is of this very long and difficult set of dream visions) in order to give a clear sense of the real meaning of the text. His version ends barely one-third of the way through the poem, though it intelligently includes all the most dramatic and character-filled moments. His concluding arguments here (as with both *Gawain* and *Beowulf*) very much reflect his own interpretation of what Piers really wanted in his allegorical search for the good Christian life, but here those arguments seem less like a scholar staking a claim for other scholars and more like a good dramatic understanding of the real spirit of the text. Like *Gawain*, *Piers* was a full hour, but Birney presents the poem in two acts, as two dreams. The first act covers, with a very large cast of characters (unusually for a radio drama) the opening passus of *Piers* (about the first five of twenty in the B-version of the text, twenty-three in the C-text), and the second ends at the well-known scene of the tearing of the pardon in Passus VII. The text starts right in with the first-person narration of Langland, the dreamer, describing his rambles in the Malvern hills and his dream. Birney has moved beyond the very scholarly need for a long introduction of the text and its background, and seems better to grasp the dramatic potential of radio. Moreover, he uses a modern version of the alliterative verse in which Langland wrote. Langland’s writing, having the flavour of everyday mus-ing and preaching and being written in an easier dialect, lends itself more easily to close adaptation into modern English, and Birney chooses rightly to use a poetic register for the opening and for the narrative interventions of Langland describing his search for truth:

Langland 1: In my dream I found myself afoot in some strange plain.  
It was a fair field full of folk endless before me,  
But all was hemmed eastward by hoary spires of mountains,

And ever along the western flank the bright field was bounded  
 By a canyon never-ending, cold, deep and darksome.  
 And when I looked in its depths, I saw a dungeon ditched and dreadful.  
 Yet as I wheeled away in fear I glimpsed upon the peaks  
 A towered castle beautiful, blinking in the sun.  
 I knew not whose it was, nor the dungeon's, nor these folk  
 Working or wandering in the endless field before me.  
 I roamed then in my trance, asking each to tell me  
 Where I was and what was here, if anything had meaning.

Birney extensively and intelligently reorganises the material, using the B-text here and largely throughout his translation (Langland did at least three different major versions of his Vision, and the critical edition by Walter W. Skeat, the only one available to Birney, interleaves the three texts, printing each from one manuscript version only). For these lines, his version skips about in the opening lines of the prologue, but perhaps its flavour can be provided by the following:

Thanne gan I to meten • a merueilouse sweuene,  
 That I was in a wilderness • wist I neuer where,  
 As I bihelde in-to the est • an hiegh to the sonne,  
 I seigh a toure on a toft • trielich ymaked;  
 A deep dale binethe • a dongeon there-inne,  
 With depe dyches and derke • and dredful of sight.  
 A faire felde ful of folke • fonde I there bytwene,  
 Of alle maner of men • the mene and the riche,  
 Worchyng and wandryng • as the worlde asketh.

(Skeat 2: B. Prologue 11-19)

Birney has the tower and the deep canyon with its dungeon, the fair field of folk, and a good modern facsimile of the Langlandian alliterative line (which permits alliteration on all four of the main stresses and is a flexible metrical tool). His other details are taken from other lines in the prologue and in the text, and it is clear that much time was spent focusing and reworking this material. Birney also has here the personal intimacy of Langland, and his somewhat relaxed delivery; Langland speaks in a contemplative mode directly to the reader who is also interested in issues of spirituality and how best to apply Christian doctrine to the ordinary life of the individual. Birney is less interested in the religion, and more in the social commentary which for Langland carried the realistic detail that gave his meditation more depth and his allegory more bite.

*Piers Plowman* is a somewhat informal medieval allegory, in that the precision of correspondence in, for example, a psychomachia, is not present and the characters—though allegorical by name and to some extent by function—develop a kind of humanity and personality. Langland's allegory has also been much discussed because it does not have the clear correspondence that one might expect: Lady Mead has to be many things other than a bashful girl incapable of choosing a proper husband or having one chosen for her by the king, among them the interpretation Birney gives her here of Dame Earthly Reward. Thus, Birney is right to shift to dialogue and short speeches in prose, and to allow the characters to develop, though many of them do simply embody their names: Theology, Peace, Lord Reason, Lawyer Liar, and Guile. The first dream consists of Langland making a preliminary search for the road to find the castle of Truth (and in the process providing a great deal of information about medieval town life including encounters with palmers, a minstrel, beggars and others), and being advised by Lady Faith to go to the wedding of Lady Mead. A quibble arises as to whether she can marry Falsehood, and all concerned jaunt off to London to have the dispute settled by the king. The king, after various offers have been made (Birney omits most of these) has Reason rule on the case, and Reason requires that Lady Mead give up all her worldly goods and live with nuns until someone marries her for herself—a very modern ending. The depiction of the social world of bustling activity in the fourteenth century is very good; one petitioner at the court is Peace, a farmer whose taxes are so high that Paul Purveyor has taken his wife, all to pay for the French war. The first dream ends, as in the original, with the ruling of Reason. Birney, while slicing out sections and producing a play rather than a dream vision, has been relatively faithful to the medieval text.

Dream Two moves from passus IV with the parade of the Seven Deadly Sinners to the tearing of the pardon in Passus VII and Langland's awakening again on the Malvern Hills. Repentance calls the Sinners forward in sequence, and has progressively longer and longer discussions with each of them:

Pride: (*Coming up*) O mercy, father, mercy, What shall I do, I who have hated humility?

Repentance: Unsew that silken gown and sew thyself in goathair. Hold thyself low and suffer what slander comes. Dost promise?

Pride: Aye, sir, I promise.

Repentance: Go, then, Pride. And now Lechery, hang not back. On thy fat knees, man.

Lechery: Alas, Mary, mercy on my misdeeds.

Repentance: God has mercy—but what wilt thou do to gain it?  
 Lechery: I shall give up wine.  
 Repentance: Aye—and?  
 Lechery: Yes yes, I shall dine with the ducks and all drinkers of water.  
 Repentance: And?  
 Lechery: (*sighs*) I shall give up whores and—and be true to my wife (101-102).

Birney here uses very ably the give and take of dialogue which will work well on the radio to personalize and create empathy for his characters. Even Envy becomes a real character, in the next exchange, because his neighbour is jealous that Envy might “win an Essex cheese at the next wrestling.” These are Langland’s details, and the reason *Piers Plowman* is vividly realized, but Birney picks the right ones and quickens the pace considerably. The humour is retained, as the sinners all recount their sins with such delight, and give them up with grumbles and complaints. Sloth, for instance, can barely be made to wake up. The narrator steps in to request help, and at Repentance’s feet starts the walk to the shrine of Truth. Once again the pilgrims encounter a palmer, a professional pilgrim, who has collected shrines and their tokens from all over the world but has never found the way to Truth. The quest begins to have the uncertain feel of a grail quest, wandering in the lost barrens of the world. However, the pilgrims encounter Piers the Plowman, who had in youth been to Truth and returned to work for his lord ploughing his field and providing grain. He agrees, at length, to guide the pilgrims towards Truth if they will pull together and help him with his ploughing and the harvest. There is some uncertainty as to what each pilgrim might usefully do, but the medieval doctrine of the estates is upheld as the ladies embroider something for the church, the knight chases animals away from the fields, and Waster is forced by Hunger back to work in the field. Seeing the cooperation among the folk, Truth sends a pardon, which starts:

Messenger: (*Reading*) The Keeper of the Shrine of Truth—to Piers the Plowman, and to all who have helped him—greetings. It has become known to me that you, Piers, have been endeavouring to guide a pilgrim band over the many miles to my shrine. Know ye all then that your desire to seek my shrine, and your willingness to work for Piers that he might be your guide, are of more importance to me than your coming. For know ye that my shrine must always be sought, and never in certainty found....(121)

The pardon is explicit that each pilgrim should return to his or her own work and continue to do it. Langland's narrator figure intervenes to complain of the interpretation both of the pardon in English and of a Latin version the ploughman's brother the parson interprets for him. He knows that doing well, doing better, and doing best are required, but that they now appear not to be; Piers comes to agree with him, and in the end, in frustration but also conviction, he tears the pardon. Birney here is very close to the fourteenth-century text, and his version does suggest some of the confusion that has had scholars debating for many years why exactly Piers tears the pardon. However, Birney rightly decides not to include the two-thirds (or three-quarters, depending on the manuscript and text version) remaining of the poem, the further search and debate, and the discussions of doing well, doing better and doing best. Birney provides here the opening ideas and scenes of the text and gives a real sense of the richness of *Piers Plowman*.

Piers Plowman himself was so strong a character that Birney used him in his radio play "Damnation of Vancouver" (published in slightly different form as "Trial of a City"). In that play, which considers whether or not the city of Vancouver deserves to continue, Langland forms one of the witnesses for the prosecution, using the same premise as in *Piers Plowman* to indict the city. He walks around, musing about what he sees and commenting upon it. His description of the children who "came halooing" and "skirmishing off to schoolrooms under bright skies" (260) and the city as "a skyfull of grime" through which he "glimpsed the grizzled harbours and a graveyard of smokestacks, / a wilderness of wires and a weedbed of poles" sounds rather like "Anglo-Saxon Street." Intriguingly, Birney here uses the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line, which does not permit alliteration on the fourth stress, rather than the fourteenth-century alliterative line, which does. His Langland is rather more Anglo-Saxon than Langland ever was. However, Mr. Legion, counsel for the Metropolis of Vancouver and in charge of the defence of the city, calls him rather a "medieval Bolshevik" (265), which is not at all surprising. Langland in the play describes what he sees, and Birney has Legion adopt a slightly similar verse form to interrupt and disagree, unsuccessfully, with the medieval preacher. The city is saved by an Everywoman figure, Mrs. Anyone, who routs the witnesses from the past who are appalled by what has become of the city (or like Langland provide their visions of what they see) in favour of a clear-eyed statement of optimism braced by fear. She describes herself as, among other things, "the priestly plowman's child" (267), a representative figure of all mankind who will fight for life saying "It's my defiant fear keeps

green my whirling world" (271). In other words, she uses a kind of rhythmic poetic line, sometimes with alliteration, often with a rhyming couplet in the middle lines of the speech. Her language encompasses all the languages of those indicting the city. With her, Birney makes his own statement, very thinly disguised by the medieval technique of allegory, about how humanity must go forward.

Part of the reason that *Piers* works so well as a radio play is that it already has a pedagogic and hortatory purpose—and, an agenda that seems leftwing to the modern eye. Birney no doubt found its material the most conducive to his own preferences. His other plays tend in the same direction; in "Court-Martial," a play he wrote while in the army which was produced in Vancouver by Mavor Moore, the play indicts society for its treatment of the individual soldier who is on trial for attempted suicide; and in "The Griffin and the Minor Canon," Birney chooses the Frank Stockton short story which involves criticism of the citizens of Grivvle (Griffinville) for their cowardice and self-interestedness and praise for the Minor Canon who tackles the Griffin and also keeps the town running. Thus, for plots which allowed him to praise individual courage and exhort the community to better and more humane (and generally more socialist) behaviour, Birney produced stronger and more heartfelt plays.

## V

When Birney was in negotiations with Quarry Press and the CBC to publish his radio plays (perhaps following the example of Louis MacNeice and Muriel Spark (in 1969 and 1971 respectively), other texts drifted in and out of Birney's plans, but the four texts always mentioned, and discussed at some length, were the medieval ones.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in proofs Birney's notes indicate that the press had shifted *Beowulf* to a half-poetic line, which he rejected by way of a pencil note in the margin: "Run lines throughout continuously as in prose" (193.5). This is a particularly intriguing instruction since Anglo-Saxon poetic manuscripts are commonly described as having the poetry "run continuously as if prose." In other words, in his choice of presentation for the lines of *Beowulf*, Birney chose to replicate the manuscript presentation, not the half-lines with caesura between of modern editors. Moreover, later in the proofs he notes: "Set all of Langland / speeches in verse. Verse line endings marked for your reference with a slash/" (193.9-12, folder 9, page 1). Here his choice is to follow Middle English practice in his rendition, and to separate out speeches in particular into verse. Finally, in the "Damnation of Vancouver" proofs, his note reads:

“This one’s tricky, shifting in and out of poetic verse. Again \* indicates poetry and / line breaks.” Quarry Press came back in February 1984 with two further letters, requiring that Birney further explain what he now called a “rhythmic prose form,” perhaps to make it easier for the press (194.18). He also makes two interesting further notes in a letter concerning the proofs in September 1984: “Again, the scholars spell Malory’s title simply *Morte Darthur* (v. Baugh’s *Literary History of England*. Please keep it my way, and preserve my reputation as a medievalist, if I still have any.” This is a characteristically Canadian comment, but Birney is of course absolutely correct in his statement, and the efforts of the editor to alter the title to something more grammatically correct-looking were ably fought back. He also notes: “I have marked (in pencil only, so you can rub out if you disagree) a cut of Guile’s last 3 speeches, as I think he has a tediously long speech here, & only a rabid Langland fan will detect the omission.” Rare is the author who cuts from the final draft, but despite his scholarly instincts, Birney chooses in this instance for the better dramatic effect. Who other than a *Piers Plowman* scholar would disagree? Aside from demonstrating Birney’s care with the proofs and the concern to make sure the poetic sections are correctly laid out and also his professionalism in this work, these careful additions to the proofs and detailed comments on them show Birney’s concern with the visual equivalent of the aural effects that these radio dramas had in production. He wanted to make sure that the rich linguistic diversity of the plays as presented to the ear could be represented as well as possible for the eye—a virtually impossible task, but nonetheless an important effort.

Radio drama is an evanescent form in many ways. Elissa Guralnick says that “radio plays ghost away on the airwaves” and that they are generally seen as an author’s minor work (ix). Her fine analyses address Howard Barker’s *Scenes from an Execution*, Tom Stoppard’s *Artist Descending a Staircase*, the musical dimension of Robert Ferguson’s *Transfigured Night*, and many other radio plays. She argues in her afterword that radio drama at its best is really poetry. I suspect that Birney would have agreed with her. While he produced during his life very many talks for radio on many subjects, he never thought of reproducing those in a volume—but his radio plays were another matter, honed and careful works that deserved a less evanescent audience. Andrew Crisell argues that radio is a blind mode of mass communication whose codes are purely auditory, and whose deployment has to be relatively simple (1-16). The “primary code of radio is linguistic, since words are required to contextualize all the other codes” (54); in other words radio depends on the words which

categorize the music just played, or respond to the sound effect just heard, or frame the action for the listener. Crisell states that “radio language is a binary code in that words act as symbols of the objects they represent while voice is the index of the speaker” (136). A good radio play, then, needs limpidly chosen words delivered by an expert. Moreover, it needs to carry an oral residue, as Crisell calls it, which foregrounds the written text “for its beauty, not its truth” (58). Finally (and perhaps the thing that Birney liked most) is the immediacy of radio, its instant speech to each individual who happens to be listening, its way of establishing a link (and one controlled by the listener through the on/off switch) that is intimate and direct. Radio, for Birney, must have been like a poetry reading to a single individual replicated over and over; his words in conjunction with a performance—by a professional, and Birney was very good at collaborations—which made those words alive for the listener.

Neary every single critic who has worked on it argues that radio drama deserves much more attention.<sup>16</sup> Some suggest that radio drama suffers from a sense of inferiority by comparison to “real” drama on the stage, or that its concerns are difficult to articulate, its effects difficult to categorize given that each listener is an individual listening and privately determining the meaning of each broadcast. In this, as in so much else, Earle Birney was a pioneer in arguing for the importance of radio drama as an art form worth serious consideration. He tenaciously sent his radio plays to publishers, reconceptualized the collection several times, and sent it out again. In his author’s preface, he comments that though he tried television briefly, he “was an audial rather than a visual author, a word-man, and my natural medium was my own voice” (xii). Later in the preface he indicates that one reason he gave up writing radio drama was that his first love as a writer was “plain undramatic verse” (xiv). The latter may be special pleading, since Birney’s verse could never be called undramatic; in fact, his career as a radio dramatist was important to him (and not just for the money, which he complained was wholly insufficient). It was also perhaps more important to Canadian radio drama in general. Few radio dramas in Canada have achieved publication, fewer still as part of a collection of radio dramas alone. Birney’s tenacity means that his radio dramas are readily available for study, and for production.

Birney is a rare figure, a practitioner of medieval studies who also in his creative work engaged in medievalism, mediating the Middle Ages by way of his own creative processes as a poet so as to produce work charged both by Birney’s view of the past and his understanding of the present. Whether he succeeded or failed in bringing *Beowulf* and other medieval texts to life

for a Canadian radio audience in the 1950s, his attempt to do so deserves our respect and our consideration. Few have attempted the feat of explaining medieval texts as they actually were to a modern audience; that fewer still have succeeded is not surprising. Birney certainly appears to have been successful enough that the CBC came back many times for more; we cannot know the details of audience reaction, but that a Canadian public in the middle years of the twentieth century appears to have enjoyed modern recreations of medieval texts by Earle Birney seems incontrovertible.<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

- 1 The magisterial biography of Earle Birney is by Elspeth Cameron; useful biographical material is also in Davey.
- 2 205.29.2; this quotation is from "Rambling with Leonardo" typescript drafted in 1939 (more probably at least a decade later), reworked in 1982 according to a note in Birney's handwriting.
- 3 "Has Poetry a Future in Canada?" in *Spreading Time*, p. 74; originally published *Manitoba Arts Review* (Spring 1946).
- 4 *Spreading Time*, p. 147; the article was originally published in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 22 June 1949.
- 5 Letter to Robert Allan 194.12.1. In the letter Birney explores other possibilities for scripts, responds to comments made by Allan about the Frank Stockton adaptation entitled "The Griffin & the Minor Canon," and chivvies the Allans for not visiting him on "this miraculous isle," presumably Vancouver Island, where the Birneys stayed for the summer of 1950 (Cameron, p. 325).
- 6 Howard Fink discusses Birney's radio plays in two places: "Earle Birney's Radio Dramas," and "A Critical Introduction: Earle Birney's Radio Dramas," pp. xv-xxviii. Fink focuses on the more well-known plays, and for my purposes here I have used unpublished material in the Fisher archive to review the wider context of the plays Birney published thirty-five or forty years after their first performances. Box 191.1 includes letters referring to the publication of the plays, including Birney's own bibliography of them (191.1.3-4). Birney also provided a chronology of his plays when the special ECW issue was in its early stages, along with detailed suggestions for the issue (191 and 194).
- 7 Letter 14 March 1984 from Bob Hilderley, Assistant Editor for the Quarry Press, to Birney (194.18.1).
- 8 Birney, "Preface," *Words on Waves*, p. xi.
- 9 Fink, "Earle Birney's Radio Dramas," p. 65. Fink gets many of the details of dates wrong, and does not seem particularly comfortable with much of the medieval material. On the other hand, Birney's calculation of dates is not wholly trustworthy. Birney in a letter to Jack David of 28 November 1978, during preliminary negotiations for the Earle Birney issue of *Essays in Canadian Writing*, lists the texts in a slightly different order, and dates *Gawain and the Green Knight* to 1 or 2 January 1952, not 3 January 1951. He focuses in that letter on the medieval productions, and on the Conrad novella (Fisher Archive 191.1.3-4).
- 10 One particularly intriguing feature of *Beowulf* in particular is that Birney continued to

revise this piece all his life. Even the final text as provided to Quarry Press was revised in proofs, removing many hyphenated structures that Birney wanted, and generally smoothing out the text. Some errors crept in: notably on p. 6 which reads “Reached now with rake-nails *from* Beowulf” should indicate, as does Birney’s typescript, that Grendel “Reached now with rake-nails *for* Beowulf.” However, Birney had Grendel’s mother “bowling where the Spear-Danes slept” (typescript p. 8), and the press rightly preferred “howling.” There are several drafts of the *Beowulf* typescript; two of the more useful are in 54.29 and 193.4.33-37.

- 11 Elves are not prominent in *Beowulf*. At least one sword, though not this one, is described as the work of giants in the poem, but elves appear only in the creation story near the beginning (line 112), which refers to the awakening of ancient races. Hrothgar gives Beowulf this sword, this *mære maðpumsweord* “famous treasure-sword”) at line 1022.
- 12 See Robinson for the strongest and first argument of this point, which is now reflected in most modern translations.
- 13 81.14. Box 81 also includes extensive and useful materials from exams Birney set (which in Old English were rigorous), and the comprehensive exams that he wrote at Berkeley in 1929, one of the very few signs of his time in California in the archive other than the autobiography draft.
- 14 See Kate Whitehead, *The Third Programme*; the same was true in other Commonwealth countries (see especially Richard Lane, *The Golden Age of Australian Radio Drama 1923-1960*).
- 15 Box 191 includes copies of the plays and the correspondence, including an illuminating letter Birney wrote when the *ECW* special issue on his writing was in contemplation, which particularly highlighted the important plays as he saw them. He also thought at various times of including in the *Words on Waves* project a one-hour play for television that he had partly prepared called “Escaping,” a draft television script called “What is Canada” for a 1978 CBC documentary, and other texts. Initially the working title of the collection was “Words to make Waves” (192.1). In the extensive correspondence (194) which reflects Birney’s attempts to publish the radio plays, he also called the package *Gawain & other plays* as it went the rounds between 1979 and 1982.
- 16 Tim Crook is perhaps the most impassioned, starting the first chapter of his book with the statement: “Radio drama has been one of the most unappreciated and understated literary forms of the twentieth century and the purpose of this book is to demonstrate that this neglect should not continue into the twenty-first century” (Crook 3). He has a great deal of company, however. Intriguingly, one of the epigraphs for the chapter is from Marshall McLuhan, “I live right inside radio when I listen,” and Crook argues at length that this Canadian critic is the most important figure for thinking about radio, which is “auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension” (8).
- 17 An early version of this paper was delivered at the *Studies in Medievalism* conference held at Saint Louis University on 17-18 October 2003.

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