



Beowulf

Unknown , Seamus Heaney (Translator) , Francis Barton Gummere

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The earliest extant poem in a modern European language, "Beowulf" is an epic that reflects a feudal, newly Christian world of heroes and monsters, blood, victory, and death. This repackaged Signet classic Includes a Glossary of terms.

Beowulf Details

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From Reader Review Beowulf for online ebook

Loretta says

I was always quite intimidated by this book. I'm not sure why. Now I realize that my being intimidated by a book, especially by this one, was just ridiculous. What a fabulous, fabulous book! I just loved everything about it! The poetry, the story! Five big ??????????'s all the way!

Simona Bartolotta says

**"But generally the spear
is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,
no matter how admirable the bride may be."**

I'm astounded by the **complexity** of this poem. It makes me wish my Germanic philology course lasted forever so we could analyse it word by word, slowly, meticulously, languidly. This is why I personally suggest reading it with the help of a critical guide if you haven't the faintest idea what it tells about, when it was written and what it seeks to portrait, of the debate about it being Christian or not, etc. If you're willing to do some research by yourself, I promise you're in for a treat.

Riku Sayuj says

Could not consider the experience complete without reading Heaney's acclaimed translation. The acclaim was well deserved. This version was much easier to read, less choked by stylistic anachronisms and more alive in every sense. Gummere's translation has an elegance and presence that intimidates and exalts the reading but Heaney brings it home, makes it as familiar as Homer's epics and somehow makes us at ease with the strange manes and the stranger tides.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"One of these things, as far as anyone ever can discern, looks like a woman; the other, warped in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale bigger than any man, an unnatural birth called Grendel by country people in former days. They are fatherless creatures, and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart among wolves on the hills, on windswept crags and treacherous keshes, where cold streams pour down the mountain and disappear under mist and moorland."

It rained, but it was colder than what it should be to be raining. A combination of warmer atmosphere and colder temperatures on the ground produced an ice storm. It hit over the weekend so I could sit quite

comfortably by my fireplace and watch out the window as the rain formed into sheets of ice on the streets and sidewalks. Power lines thickened as they became cubed in ice. Foot long and longer icicles dangled and swayed from the power lines, from the eaves of houses, from signs, from fence lines. The most affected though were the trees. The bigger the tree with the thicker branches, the more affected they would be. The ice accumulated on their branches bending and twisting them down to the ground. They became monsters, slumbering beneath an armour of ice.

I'd been thinking about rereading Beowulf for some time. This story has been a part of me for almost as long as I can remember. I read a child's version when I was young, several times before moving on to other more adult translations. The idea of a man taking on a monster, much stronger than most men, and finding a way to defeat him was compelling mythology for my young mind. The terror of it, the monster that comes into your home and kills in the dead of the night and takes heads as trophies, left shivers in the very center of me.

Beowulf hears of a monster who is attacking the Danes. He is one of thirteen men who decide to go to the rescue of Hrothgar, King of the Danes. He goes because he needs to make a name for himself, as Buliwyf in the movie *The 13th Warrior* says: "*I have only these hands.*" Beowulf is poor, renowned for his strength, but he has no Hall to call his own and, but for this small band, no men to call him King.

"Their mail-shirts glinted, hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron of their armour rang. So they duly arrived in their grim war-graith and gear at the hall, and, weary from the sea, stacked wide shields of the toughest hardwood against the wall, then collapsed on the benches; battle-dress and weapons clashed. They collected their spears in a seafarers' stook, a stand of greyish tapering ash. And the troops were as good as their weapons."

I had spent most of the day finishing another book and, thus, had started reading Beowulf late in the evening. The wife and my Scottish Terrier had gone to bed, and I was left in the soft glow of my reading lamp. Most of the city had lost power as lines too heavy with ice had crashed down one by one. I had candles close to hand. It never crossed my mind, power or no power, that I would go to bed. Beowulf was written in Old English between 975-1025. The Seamus Heaney translation that I read had the Old English on one page and Heaney's translation on the other page. In college, I took a Chaucer class and became a fair hand at deciphering Middle English, but looking and even pronouncing these unfamiliar words did not ring any ancient bells in my English soul. I would have had better luck reading Greek than Old English.

1,000 year old manuscript of Beowulf.

As Beowulf grapples with Grendel and then with Grendel's mother, I was just as enthralled with the story as I was as a wee tot. The carnage, the darkness, the uncertainty that Beowulf had to feel, despite his boasts to the contrary, all lend a fine, sharp edge to the tale. As I read, I also started to hear the sharp cracks and howls of ice heavy tree limbs separating from their trunk in much the same way as Beowulf pulls Grendel's arm loose from his shoulder. The crash of these ice shrouded branches against the frozen ground sounded to my mind like the steel swords of the Geats banging against their metal wrapped shields.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I walked out of my back door into an alien landscape. Each individual stem of grass had frozen into a nub of ice. With every step, my boots crunched and slipped across this icy topography. Piles of limbs laid at the bottoms of the bigger trees. A small limb detached from the cottonwood tree as I stood there and made discordant music as it hit the limbs below before finally landing

among its fallen, dying brethren on the ground. The younger trees, more limber, were probably fine, I told myself. They are bowed over as if in supplication to Mother Nature. Their top branches were frozen to the ground, making arches of their shapes. It was all very beautiful. I remembered reading about a party that was given for Anastasia, the Russian princess, before her life became tangled in the turmoil of revolution. The servants were outside spraying water on the trees so they would glitter with ice as the aristocracy arrived on their horse pulled, bell laden sleighs.

I went back inside and peeled off my boots and my jacket and returned to Beowulf. Another log was required for the fire, so I spent a few moments poking the remaining logs to make room for more wood. I flinched as I heard more crashes from outside. An assembly of Geats preparing for battle. When I finally settled back into my chair, Beowulf has become King of the Geats and fights battles with the greatest champions of the land. He involves himself in disagreements. **"When Eofor cleft the old Swede's helmet, halved it open, he fell, death-pale: his feud-calloused hand could not stave off the fatal blow."**

I just loved that...*feud-calloused hand*. I also really liked...*"your blade making a mizzle of his blood."* There are lines like that all through the story. Words unfamiliar and evocative of a different age.

Beowulf does age and does need the help of others in the end when he battles a dragon, but few men are made with the courage that he is, and they fail to help him when he needs it most. He does kill the dragon, but at the cost of his own life.

No sword blade sent him to his death,
My bare hands stilled his heartbeats
And wrecked the bone-house. Now blade and hand,
Sword and sword-stroke, will assay the hoard."

Stormy weather requires the proper book and a proper, hot, Scottish tea laced with a few drops of Scotch whiskey. For me *Beowulf*, those 3,182 lines, added enchantment and necromancy to a world transforming before my eyes into something magical and unknown.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Michael says

I teach *Beowulf* in my honors class, and it's a tale I've always loved. There's something about the raw power, the direct yet engaging storyline, the rhythm and tone of the story that draws the reader (or, ideally, the listener) into another world. The social conventions, alien in many ways to our modern mindset, show a world both brutal and honorable, where death and heroism go side-by-side, where every act has consequence and there is no expectation of joy and happiness—these things have to be wrested from existence and are of short duration. And the interplay of the original Pagan story and the Christian elements brought in by our monastic narrator show the tension of a people wrestling with their old beliefs and how to reconcile them with the new. The startling use of language and poetic diction make this a masterpiece of English literature.

I've read a dozen translations (and even done my own crude one); each of them has different aspects to recommend it. Heaney's strength is in his poetic voice—he's done an amazing job of preserving the rhythms and alliterations so crucial to the format of the original verse and updated it without being so modern as to lose the flavor of the original. He uses some archaic terms and those of his Celtic ancestors, which work well and do not mar the understanding of readers new to the text. Best of all, this is a parallel translation, with the original Old English on the *verso* pages.

My only quibbles have to do with some of Heaney's word choices. There are debates within the literary community about the nature of the monsters (and the heroes) in the poem, and Heaney takes a pretty hard line, translating some phrases and terms in ways that make his choices seem unavoidable (but which are not always supported in the original). Innocent phrases like "wight" and "spirit" are sometimes glossed as "demon" or "specter," and we lose the sense of some of the wonderful Old English kennings, like the description of Grendel as a *mearcstapa*, "walker on the borders."

Overall, a really fine translation. (And since it's been immortalized in *The Norton Anthology* and all Norton's student editions, it will be *the* version most everyone knows for the foreseeable future.)

Michael says

bum bum IN A WORLD . . . *bum bum* . . . FULL OF NASTY MONSTERS . . . *bum bum* . . . WHO
EAT PEOPLE AND BREAK INTO CASTLES . . . *bum bum* . . . THE BEASTLY GRENDL LURKED
LONG OVER THE MOORES . . . *bum bum* . . . BUT NOW . . . *Cut to scene of monster ripping
someone's face off with his teeth*

(silence. black screen.)

Unknown warriors approaching

*"Who are ye, then, ye armed men,
mailed folk, that yon mighty vessel
have urged thus over the ocean ways,
here o'er the waters?"*

bum bum . . . ONE MAN . . . *bum bum* . . . ONE LARGE MAN . . . *bum bum* . . . OF NOBLE
BIRTH AND LONG, LONG SWORD . . . *bum bum* . . . IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN SAVE THEM.

*"Hither have fared to thee far-come men
o'er the paths of ocean, people of Geatland;
and the stateliest there by his sturdy band
is Beowulf named. This boon they seek,
that they, my master, may with thee
have speech at will: nor spurn their prayer
to give them hearing, gracious Hrothgar!
In weeds of the warrior worthy they,
methinks, of our liking; their leader most surely,
a hero that hither his henchmen has led."*

cue symphony: BUM-BUM-BUUUUMMMMM! BUM-BUM-BUUUUMMMMM

Beowulf speaks:

*"To Hrothgar I
in greatness of soul would succor bring,
so the Wise-and-Brave may worst his foes, --
if ever the end of ills is fated,
of cruel contest, if cure shall follow,
and the boiling care-waves cooler grow;
else ever afterward anguish-days
he shall suffer in sorrow while stands in place
high on its hill that house unpeered!"*

Everyone looks around at each other, wondering what the fuck he's talking about

Exciting symphony, something along the lines of "O Fortuna." combat shown as Beowulf tosses Grendel down, gets Grendel in a headlock, pokes him in his eyes. Beowulf takes his shoe off and starts hitting Grendel on the top of his head with it.

Music stops. Shot of Beowulf on the shore, hand on his hilt.

Beowulf speaks:

"Tis time that I fare from you. Father Almighty
in grace and mercy guard you well,
safe in your seekings. Seaward I go,
'gainst hostile warriors hold my watch."

BEOWULF. PG-13, Parents Strongly Cautioned. Contains Monsters Biting People's Faces Off, Graphic Far-Fetched Violence, and Shots of Beowulf's Bare Chest.

Beowulf is totally the precursor to Conan, and Rambo. He's mothafuckin' badass. And you know how, since the Rambo movies are so old, they come out in boxed sets now? Think of this slim volume as a trilogy:

BEOWULF

BEOWULF II: MOMMY DEAREST

BEOWULF III: BEOWULF VERSUS A BIG-ASS DRAGON

While often trilogies get worse as they go along, this one actually improves. And it's safe to say that a fourth sequel will never come out about Beowulf after he gets old and out of shape. . . although that might be what BEOWULF VERSUS A BIG-ASS DRAGON is.

If you like football, Stallone, Escape From New York, and can't get enough of Arnold Schwarzenegger, this is THE classic for you.

AJ Griffin says

If I wrote a list of things I don't give a shit about, I'm pretty sure "some big fucking monster whose name sounds like a word for the area between my balls and my ass that attacks alcoholics and is eventually slain by some asshole, told entirely in some ancient form of English that I don't understand" would be near the top (for the record, run-on sentences would not. Judge not).

This was one of the first books I was ever assigned to read in high school, and I'm pretty sure it was the catalyst to my never caring about school again.

God do I hate this fucking book.

Seth T. says

I've just finished reading Beowulf for the third time! But lo, this reading was in the bold and exciting Beowulf: a New Verse Translation by Seamus Heaney! And what a difference a day makes - Heaney is unstoppable! Rather, he makes Beowulf unstoppable. Unstoppable in his ability to pound you in the face with his manliness and leave you bleeding-but-strangely-desiring-more.

As I said, I've read the epic Anglo-Saxon poem several times now, but usually, I'm trudging through to get to the "good parts" (i.e., Beowulf's three notable feats), but this time, I was taken aback! The whole durned thing was the good parts! What luck! I read it over the space of three days and boy is my voice tired (I have a distinct inability when it comes to facing these sorts of tales - I have to read aloud. And with an accent. And with bluster).

One of the coolest things spicing up this reading (besides Heaney's great translation) was the juxtaposition of the Old English to the translation. As you may know, the only surviving copy of anything close to an original Beowulf is written in Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) from 'tween AD 700 and 1000. Now Old English isn't just archaic some King James English with lotsa thees, thous, and forsooths, as many people seem to think. It's the illegitimate birth father of Middle English (which I believe came about sometime after AD 1066) which in turn spawned Modern English. Modern English includes the English used in both Shakespeare and the King James Bible as well as the haphazard trash we sprechen today. In truth, Old English is nearly indecipherable. Below, I've included the first three lines of Beowulf, which are not only a great example of what I'm talking about, but strangely fitting for who I am:

**Hwæt wê Gâr-dena in geâr-dagum
Þêod-cyninga Þrym gefrûnon,
hû ðâ æþelingas ellen fremedon.**

Fun, no? Well... so you know, that translates as:

**So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.**

Hoorah! Hoorah for the Spear-Danes! And...*ahem* ..who cares if by the time Beowulf comes around their

busy getting their butts eaten off by Grendel. Hoorah for the Spear-Danes! Hoorah for Gâr-dena (and doesn't that sound like a wonderful name for a city?).

In any case, it was fun to look over at the Anglo-Saxon to see if I could decipher any of it. Alas, my attention was so rapt upon the tale that I didn't take as much time to peruse the original as I would have liked. But since I bought it, I should be afforded plenty of time for such trivialities.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

As a college English major, I studied *Beowulf* without any great enthusiasm; my real love was for the Romantic poets. And Chaucer, but that might have been partly because I thought it was hilarious that we were studying such bawdy material at BYU. Plus you can still puzzle out *The Canterbury Tales* in its original Middle English, with the help of a few handy annotations, while *Beowulf* in the original Old English--other than the immortal (at least in my mind) line "B?owulf is m?n nama"--is beyond anyone but scholars, and it loses something in translation.

So I cheerfully forgot about *Beowulf* until I was puttering around in Barnes and Noble one day, and came across Seamus Heaney's recent translation. I read his forward and was absolutely entranced by its brilliance. Heaney tosses off phrases like "the poem possesses a mythic potency" and talks about the "three archetypal sites of fear: the barricaded night-house, the infested underwater current, and the reptile-haunted rocks of a wilderness." He discusses how we are enveloped "in a society that is at once honour-bound and blood-stained, presided over by the laws of the blood-feud." And he explains in detail how he went about creating a new translation of the poem and the difficulty of finding the right voice:

A simple sentence such as "We cut the corn to-day" took on immense dignity when one of [my father's relatives] spoke it. They had a kind of Native American solemnity of utterance, as if they were announcing verdicts rather than making small talk. And when I came to ask myself how I wanted *Beowulf* to sound in my version, I realized I wanted it to be speakable by one of those relatives.

Anyway, all this is to explain why, after years of blissfully ignoring *Beowulf*, I felt compelled to buy this book and give it another try. Did it hold up to my hopes? Well, not quite. I still appreciate *Beowulf* more than I love it. But I heard the solemn, deliberate voice that Heaney was seeking to use, and I thought he did a great job of translating it as well as possible into modern English while preserving the original feel and intent of the poem. I love the liberal use of alliteration and the compound words (whale-road = sea; ring-giver = king) that are found in the original version of the poem as well as this translation. I felt the side-by-side nobility and brutality of these characters from (it's surmised) 6th century Scandinavia. And I was getting some serious Tolkien vibes from the ending, which is not at all a bad thing.

In the end, it was a bit of a tough slog reading through the entire poem, but I'm glad I did it. I think I still love Heaney's forward more than I love the actual *Beowulf* poem. I need to check out J.R.R. Tolkien's *Beowulf* translation one of these days.

Francisco says

Beowulf - you might have encountered it at a college English class. Your teacher may have written a few of

the original lines of Old English on the blackboard and had you try to decipher them. There was probably lots of history taught in that class: the poem was written by an Anglo-Saxon poet some time between the 8th and the 11th century. The poet, a Christian, wrote about events taking place in "heathen" England two or three centuries before. If your English class was anything like mine there was probably a lot of analysis about the "mixture" of world views - the Christian and the Germanic. And all along, you were probably hoping that the teacher move on to something more exciting. But here's why you may want to give this particular classic another try. First, chances are that the Seamus Heaney's translation will convey to you the essential beauty of the poem in a way that other translations couldn't do. And by "essential" I mean that sometimes it takes a poet's sensibility to intuit the right and clear presentation of another poet's meaning. It is not a case of avoiding the literal and the precise but rather the acknowledgment that translation is an art that requires not only scholarship but also creativity and intuition. All you have to do is read Seamus Heaney's introduction and you will know almost immediately that you are in the presence of a man of extraordinary gifts who has taken great care to present you with a work of everlasting beauty. I am not going to tell you about the "plot" of the poem because there is no "plot" other than three battles between a hero and evil represented in various forms. The fact that these representations of evil are "fantastic" only adds to the extraordinariness of this early work. One of the greatest contributions of this edition by Norton is the inclusion of the most incisive critical essays on the poem, including, J.R.R. Tolkien's ground breaking, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* where Tolkien takes on the countless critics who have lamented the poet's decision to portray conflicts between a man and monsters and dragons in lieu of more historical or more realistic encounters between humans. (Tolkien's essay, by the way, will also give you a greater understanding of why Tolkien chose to do certain things in *The Lord of the Rings*) What Tolkien will remind you of and what you will feel when you read the poem again is that the story of a man fighting battles he will eventually lose but which he must nevertheless continue fighting is as heart-enhancing today as it was in the eight century. Courage, after all, has little to do with the success of the fight.

Aubrey says

I doubt I would have liked this so much had *The Lord of Rings* not been such an essential part of me so early on. Books are the one and only thing that has been mine and my own since the beginning, and the rings, the dragons, the songs of days long lost and the coming of the end have filled the place of me that religion never could. While there is much to critique, it has sunk so deeply into my resonance that the best I can do is hope that everyone has such a refuge in their heritage as I do in English. *Beowulf* played the strings of Tolkien, Tolkien played the strings of me, and the most I can do is seek out the same in worlds beyond the same old, same old.

Beyond my nostalgic tone, there is the text itself with its strong rhythm, unusual self-reflexivity, and a future that looks back onto the crossroads with relief and a yearning. They are old, these crossroads, traversing a time when bloodshed belonged to a single self and the conquering strain had not yet set the tone for my postcolonial times. It is a time popularly known as the Dark Ages, a naming that shows how little use there is in generic categorizations that ignore both the frame of reference and the multifarious qualities of "Dark." True, there is neither Emperor nor Empire, but in its place is loyalty, blood, and a breed of mythos that has lost none of its awful potency in the age of climate change and drones.

Others have likely spoken about the lack of women, and it bears mentioning how few of them were worthy of a name in the family trees of the appendix. While good to keep an eye on during general reading, this text is an old and singular survivor of burning and religious condemnation, and what merits it would not have had it been written today will be granted. Much like my recently read 'Oroonoko,' it is a window to the past, and

while much referred in academia to the detriment of less European texts, it also sparks a wondering thought: what else was going on in the world back then? What other voices have made their long and torturous way to the present conscious, and how many have yet to be given their due?

My modern age has given me much in terms of technology, but still it malingers in Eurocentric repetition. I doubt I shall live to see the day when *Beowulf* is joined by twenty or more of its polytongued siblings in halls that give each the credit they're due, but I can begin making my own way towards those waiting, not so foreign strings.

Alex says

Beowulf and his drunk meathead friends are having a loud party, and their neighbor Grendel comes over like hey guys, can you keep it down? - that's funny because actually he eats a bunch of them - and then Beowulf tears his fuckin' arm off and nails it above his door, and honestly nobody really comes out of this looking like a good neighbor, do they?

So like Humbaba in Gilgamesh, or Odysseus's cyclops, Polyphemus, we have a monster of questionable monstrosity. Beowulf started it, right? And then Grendel's mom gets involved, as moms do, and then later there's a dragon.

It's become fashionable lately to claim that the Dark Ages weren't so dark. There were great civilizations like the Celts and the Golden Age of Islam; there was extensive trade; things weren't so bad. This is not entirely true at the best of times - seriously, this was a shitty thousand years full of wars and plagues - but it's especially untrue when we're talking about literature. Between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance in the 1300s, there is not much good stuff to read.

So the stoic, tragic, beautiful Beowulf is one of the few high points in this whole millenium. Here's what it sounds like. Check out the alliteration - that's when words start with the same letter; in most Old English stuff, like this and the awesome Gawain, they didn't use rhyme so much. They depended on alliteration.

(By the way, if you want a challenge, look on Youtube for someone reciting Beowulf without holding a sword. The crossover between fans of this poem and fans of Dungeons & Dragons is pretty heavy.)

I've read Beowulf like five times now. This was my second time through Heaney's translation, which (like Armitage's translation of Gawain and the Green Knight) conveniently gives the original text on the left side and Heaney's translation on the right. That's super cool, and this is the exact translation that appears on The Toast's list of books that literally all white men own, so I guess that tells you whether you should buy it or just borrow it from some white dude you know. You can come over any time, I got a nice living room.

Here it is, with a custom bookmark my friend Frank whipped up special on his 3D printer, it's Grendel's arm.

(More of my custom bookmark project here)

J.G. Keely says

There are different ways to translate, and it comes down to what you want to get across. Most creative authors have such a strong voice and sense of story that they will overwhelm the original author. As Bentley wrote of Pope's Iliad: "It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer".

Sometimes this sort of indirect translation is useful in itself, such as during the transition of the Renaissance from Italy to Britain. Many of the British poets rewrote Italian sonnets into English, and though the line of descent was unquestionable, the progeny was its own work. Another example might be the digestion of Wuxia and Anime into films such as Tarantino's or The Matrix (though Tarantino's sense of propriety is often suspect).

However, in these cases, we can hardly call the new work a translation of the old. You are not experiencing the old work but the inspiration it has wrought. Beowulf is just this sort of translation, capturing the excitement and passion of the story, but obliterating the details which make the work interesting to students of history or literary theory.

Heaney's translation is a fun, rollicking epic, able to draw in even uninitiated students, which is no doubt why it is now included in Norton. Unfortunately, it is not a particularly useful tool for teaching the importance of the original work. Heaney severs many connections to the unique world of Beowulf.

As the only surviving epic from its time, place, and tradition, Beowulf is a unique vision into a pre-Christian culture outside of the Mediterranean. Though the poem shows Christian revisions, these stand out in stark contrast to the rest of the work, and can usually be easily excised, unlike many pervasive Christian impositions on the 'pagan' cultures.

Heaney is not a philologist nor a historian, but a popular poet. He doesn't have the background for conscientious translation, and the clearest sign that his translation is haphazard is the fact that there are no footnotes explaining the difficult decisions that most translators have to make in every line. Heaney also loses much of the alliteration and appositives that marked the artistry of the original.

A Beowulf that can exist without context is a Beowulf that has well and truly been separated from its past. Perhaps his translation is suitable for an introduction to the work, but a good professor should be able to teach the original without much difficulty.

Then again, perhaps the inclusion of this version in college classes has to do with the fact that college is no longer the path for scholars, but has been given the same equality treatment as art and poetry. College is now meant for your average, half-literate frat boy who only wants a BA so he can be a mid-level retail manager.

Heaney's translation certainly suits for them, since it is the easiest version of the story this side of a digital Angelina. It's fun and exciting, certainly worth a read, but doesn't stand up as a translation.

James says

Beowulf is thought to have been written around the year 1000 AD, give or take a century. And the author is the extremely famous, very popular and world renowned writer... Unknown. Got you there, didn't I? LOL Probably not... if you're on Goodreads and studied American or English literature, you probably already knew this is one of the most famous works without an author.

It was first really *published* in the 1800s, using the Old English version where many have translated it, but there are still some blurry parts of the story. Essentially, a monster named Grendel hunts and kills the people of a town and many warriors have died fighting against it. Beowulf tackles the monster and its mother, and well... you're gonna have to read it to find out. Or if you can't get yourself there, watch the Star Trek or Simpsons episode which does a nice little rendition.

Here's the reasons why you should take a look at the story:

1. Many famous writers and editors have attempted to translate the story into more modern English. Tolkien is a famous example. Each reader has his/her own interpretation. So pick one whose style you like and go to that version.
2. It's a translated book... other than the famous Greek literature we read in high school, it's one of the earliest translated forms of literature. Makes it worth taking a gander.
3. It's a really great story. Monster terrorizes people. Someone strong steps up to fight it. There is a victory of sorts. Momma wants revenge. So... how many books have you read that have just copied... I mean borrowed... that entire plot?
4. There is a lot of beauty in the prose and the verse, and when you hear the words describe the creatures, it's a bit like fantasy.

Here's why you may not like it:

1. It's long.
2. It's hard to understand at some points.
3. It's 1000 years old and you just like modern stories.

My advice... pick a passage or two, read for 30 minutes and decide if it's something you want to read more of. But you should always give a chance to some part of our early heritage and culture. Right?

About Me

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at

<https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by.

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Roger Brunyate says

The Book I Thought I Knew

1. A Confession. This made a big splash it first came out in 2000. I bought it mostly for duty, but didn't read it. After all, I had studied the text in the original at University; I could even recite the opening. Surely I just needed a nudge, and it would all come back to me—so why bother with a translation?

Oh, the arrogance! When I opened this, and saw the original text on the left-hand pages, I found I could not make it out at all; I had even been misremembering the opening lines for all those years. I realized, too, that my study in 1960 must have been confined to laborious parsing; it left me with almost no sense of *Beowulf* as a work of literature. And I was astonished at opening this translation by Seamus Heaney, a Nobel laureate no less, to discover how natural and easy to read it was, how unassuming, how little (in the decorative sense) "poetic"! Heaney explains all these things in a superb Introduction that manages to be scholarly and personal at the same time. But let me offer a few points of my own.

2. The Poem. The narrative core of the poem consists of three feats by the warrior hero Beowulf. A prince of the Geats (that is, from Southern Sweden), he sails to the aid of Hrothgar of Denmark, whose kingdom is being ravaged by a monster named Grendel. Beowulf determines to tackle the monster *mano-a-mano*, and deals it a mortal wound, tearing off an entire arm at the shoulder. But then he has to deal with Grendel's vengeful mother, an even more terrible fight, taking place partly underwater. He returns home and eventually becomes king of his people. But at the very end of his life, he faces one more challenge: to take on a dragon keeping guard over a golden hoard, whose fiery breath melts the sword in his hand.

None of these episodes takes much more than 100 lines each of a 3,000-line poem, but the remainder is far more than filler; this is a saga that, at least in this translation, moves swiftly without any loss of interest. Part of it is the ritual celebration of heroism. Before and after each exploit there is a mighty feast in which gifts and compliments are exchanged. Beowulf precedes each with a "formal boast," his public commitment to the undertaking. There are countless stories of heroic deeds, and cautionary tales of people who did not show the chivalry appropriate to their rank. All of this builds up a picture of a pagan society, made up of smallish tribe-kingdoms held together by loyalty to their warrior lord, and defended by feats of arms and fragile treaties. Though much later, it is a far more primitive picture than that painted by Homer in the *Iliad* and closer to that familiar from Wagner's *Ring*.

Only it is not pagan. One of the things that most surprised me on this reading was to discover how Christian it is. No matter how long the poet extols Beowulf's physical prowess, he will at some point defer to the power of God. "The truth is clear: / Almighty God rules over mankind / and always has." I suppose this comes from the fact that this is an old Nordic story being retold centuries later in Christianized England. This

retelling may also explain the landscape of the poem, which is the familiar setting of crags, moors, and mountains later claimed by Wagner and Tolkien. But Denmark is an entirely flat country and Southern Sweden scarcely more rugged; the sea journey between them is scarcely an Odyssey

3. Language and Style. Most people can read the language of Chaucer, Middle English, with the aid of a glossary. But Old English is more than a simple step beyond; it is virtually a different tongue: Anglo-Saxon. Here is the opening of *Beowulf*:

*Hwæt we Gar-Dena in gear-dagum
þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.*

First, those extra characters: the "ash" [æ], pronounced like the "a" in "hat"; the "eth" [ð] and "thorn" [þ] representing different varieties of the "th" sound. Then the actual meanings; a literal translation might go like this:

Hey! We Spear-Danes in year-days
people-kings glory have heard,
how then princes courage performed.

Or, more colloquially, "Hear the heroic deeds of Danish kings in days of yore!" Although it is a language of few words, Heaney aims for clarity rather than compression; here is how he begins:

*So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had
courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.*

Note that Heaney nonetheless follows the rhythmic structure of the Anglo-Saxon, with two stresses in each half of the line, separated by a significant caesura. He makes some attempt to follow the original's use of alliteration (Danes/days, kings/courage, heard/heroic), but never to the point of mannerism. The more recent translation by Stephen Mitchell that I shall look at in more detail below is also clear, but makes rather more of the alliteration:

*Of the strength of the Spear-Danes in days gone by
we have heard, and of their hero kings:
the prodigious deeds those princes performed!*

Two other features of Old (as opposed to Middle) English are the total avoidance of Latinate words and the corresponding fondness for new words created as compounds of simple roots. Heaney's writing feels Northern rather than Latin, not least because the voice he says he was hearing in his head was a Northern Ireland one, but he does not completely avoid Latin derivations (ruled, courage, campaigns). In an amusing aside in his Introduction, he says that he was born to translate *Beowulf* because his own early work as a student was so heavily influenced by the archaizing style of Gerard Manley Hopkins that it was virtually Anglo-Saxon:

*Starling thatch-watched and sudden swallow
Straight breaks to mud-nest, home-rest rafter.*

We can be glad that the poet largely shook those influences off, and resisted the temptation to return to them

when faced with real Anglo-Saxon, although he takes occasional delight in the joys of coinage, as when Beowulf first announces his intent: "The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard." And his reticence at other times enables him to call upon the full panoply of sound when he needs it for special effect, as at the climax of Beowulf's declaration of intent:

*I will show him how Geats shape to kill
in the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to
may go bravely to mead, when morning light,
scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south
and brings another daybreak to the world."*

Above all, it must not be forgotten that the *Beowulf* bard was an oral poet; these are lines written for declamation, not for reading. There are many videos on YouTube; I would recommend this one of the first few lines of the opening; it shows the text as it is read, and steers a good middle course between the conversational and the pretentious. But the greatest joy to be found on YouTube is Seamus Heaney reading his own translation. Do listen to it; this is a poet's voice, turning the apparent prose of the printed words into epic gold.

4. Two Translations. In the bookstore, looking for some of Heaney's other works, I came upon a newer translation of *Beowulf* by Stephen Mitchell (Yale, 2017). It is equally well produced, also bilingual, and seems equally impressive at brief glance. However, I took images of a couple of passages that had impressed me in the Heaney, thinking to make a direct comparison. One is where Grendel first approaches the hall:

HEANEY:

*In off the moors, down through the mist-bands
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk, he moved towards it
until it shone above him, a sheer keep
of fortified gold.*

MITCHELL:

*Then up from the moor, in a veil of mist,
Grendel came slouching. He bore God's wrath.
The evil brute intended to trap
and eat some human in the great hall.
Under the clouds he crept, until
he saw the mead-hall, glistening with gold.*

The second comes twenty lines later, when the monster claims his first victim; don't we always have to see some bit-player getting killed before the hero goes into action? This time, let's reverse the translations:

MITCHELL:

*Beowulf watches
to see where the killer would strike first.
And the demon did not delay; in a flash
he lunged and seized a warrior sleeping,
tore him apart, gnawed bones, drank blood*

*gushing from veins, gorged on gobbets
of flesh, and soon had devoured the victim
utterly, even his hands and feet.*

HEANEY:

*Mighty and canny,
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching
for the first move the monster would make.
Nor did the creature keep him waiting
but struck suddenly and started in;
he grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
utterly lifeless, eaten up
hand and foot.*

Is there much difference between them? I would gladly read either, and might well buy the Mitchell too. He is certainly the more immediate; there is something splendid about "tore him apart, gnawed bones, drank blood gushing from veins, gorged on gobbets of flesh." Heaney can be as strong; writing about the monsters in his Introduction, he says:

Grendel comes alive in the reader's imagination as a kind of dog-breath in the dark, a fear of collision with some hard-boned and immensely strong android frame, a mixture of Caliban and hoplite. And while his mother too has a definite brute-bearing about her, a creature of slouch and lunge on land if seal-swift in the water, she nevertheless retains a certain non-strangeness.

But this is in prose. In the poem, he is more careful, I think, to respond to its antiquity. He is the only one to retain the mid-line caesura; Mitchell rides right over it. He seems to relish the compound words like "mist-bands," "God-cursed," "cloud-murk," and "bone-lappings." Each one strikes the ear with a jolt of strangeness that nudge us back in time to the Dark Ages where the pagan order jostles with the new. Not every reader will like that, but especially after reading his Introduction, I realize that it is this that impresses me the most. For Heaney, it is the antiquity of the work and the challenge of bringing it into our world that speaks to his personal development as a poet, to the history of his race as an Irishman, and to our moral journey as a civilization. As he says in his epigraph, in his own poetry now, gnomic and pithy:

*And now this is 'an inheritance'—
Upright, rudimentary, unshiftable planked
In the long ago, yet willable forward*

Again and again and again.
