



Beowulf: A New Verse Translation

From Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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Beowulf: A New Verse Translation From Farrar, Straus and Giroux

A brilliant and faithful rendering of the Anglo-Saxon epic from the Nobel laureate.

Composed toward the end of the first millennium of our era, *Beowulf* is the elegiac narrative of the adventures of Beowulf, a Scandinavian hero who saves the Danes from the seemingly invincible monster Grendel and, later, from Grendel's mother. He then returns to his own country and dies in old age in a vivid fight against a dragon. The poem is about encountering the monstrous, defeating it, and then having to live on in the exhausted aftermath. In the contours of this story, at once remote and uncannily familiar at the end of the twentieth century, Seamus Heaney finds a resonance that summons power to the poetry from deep beneath its surface.

Drawn to what he has called the "four-squareness of the utterance" in *Beowulf* and its immense emotional credibility, Heaney gives these epic qualities new and convincing reality for the contemporary reader.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In *Beowulf* warriors must back up their mead-hall boasts with instant action, monsters abound, and fights are always to the death. The Anglo-Saxon epic, composed between the 7th and 10th centuries, has long been accorded its place in literature, though its hold on our imagination has been less secure. In the introduction to his translation, Seamus Heaney argues that *Beowulf's* role as a required text for many English students obscured its mysteries and "mythic potency." Now, thanks to the Irish poet's marvelous recreation (in both senses of the word) under Alfred David's watch, this dark, doom-ridden work gets its day in the sun.

There are endless pleasures in Heaney's analysis, but readers should head straight for the poem and *then* to the prose. (Some will also take advantage of the dual-language edition and do some linguistic teasing out of their own.) The epic's outlines seem simple, depicting Beowulf's three key battles with the scaliest brutes in all of art: Grendel, Grendel's mother (who's in a suitably monstrous snit after her son's dismemberment and death), and then, 50 years later, a gold-hoarding dragon "threatening the night sky / with streamers of fire." Along the way, however, we are treated to flashes back and forward and to a world view in which a thane's allegiance to his lord and to God is absolute. In the first fight, the man from Geatland must travel to Denmark to take on the "shadow-stalker" terrorizing Heorot Hall. Here Beowulf and company set sail:

Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
sand churned in the surf, warriors loaded
a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
Over the waves, with the wind behind her
and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird...

After a fearsome night victory over march-haunting and heath-marauding Grendel, our high-born hero is suitably strewn with gold and praise, the queen declaring: "Your sway is wide as the wind's home, / as the sea around cliffs." Few will disagree. And remember, Beowulf has two more trials to undergo.

Heaney claims that when he began his translation it all too often seemed "like trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer." The poem's challenges are many: its strong four-stress line, heavy alliteration, and profusion of kennings could have been daunting. (The sea is, among other things, "the whale-road," the sun is "the world's candle," and Beowulf's third opponent is a "vile sky-winger." When it came to over-the-top compound phrases, the temptations must have been endless, but for the most part, Heaney smiles, he "called a sword a sword.") Yet there are few signs of effort in the poet's Englishing. Heaney varies his lines with ease, offering up stirring dialogue, action, and description while not stinting on the epic's mix of fate and fear. After Grendel's misbegotten mother comes to call, the king's evocation of her haunted home may strike dread into the hearts of men and beasts, but it's a gift to the reader:

A few miles from here
a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch
above a mere; the overhanging bank
is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.
At night there, something uncanny happens:
the water burns. And the mere bottom

has never been sounded by the sons of men.
On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:
the hart in flight from pursuing hounds
will turn to face them with firm-set horns
and die in the wood rather than dive
beneath its surface. That is no good place.

In Heaney's hands, the poem's apparent archaisms and Anglo-Saxon attitudes--its formality, blood-feuds, and insane courage--turn the art of an ancient island nation into world literature. --*Kerry Fried*

From Publishers Weekly

When the great monster Grendel comes to Denmark and dashes its warriors' hopes, installing himself in their great hall and eating alive the valiant lords, the hero Beowulf arrives from over the ocean to wrestle the beast. He saves the Danes, who sing of his triumphs, but soon the monster's mother turns up to take him hostage: having killed her, our hero goes home to the land of the Geats, acquires the kingship, and fights to the death an enormous dragon. That's the plot of this narrative poem, composed more than a millennium ago in the Germanic language that gave birth (eventually) to our version of English. Long a thing for professors to gloss, the poem includes battles, aggressive boasts, glorious funerals, frightening creatures and a much-studied alliterative meter; earlier versions in current vernacular have pleased lay readers and helped hard-pressed students. Nobel laureate Heaney has brought forth a finely wrought, controversial (for having won a prize over a children's book) modern English version, one which retains, even recommends, the archaic strengths of its warrior world, where "The Spear-Danes in days gone by/ and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness." Well-known digressionsAa detailed dirge, the tale-within-a-tale of Hengest, "homesick and helpless" in ancient FrieslandAfind their ways into Heaney's English, which holds to the spirit (not always the letter) of the en face Anglo-Saxon, fusing swift story and seamless description, numinous adjectives and earthy nouns: in one swift scene of difficult swimming, "Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on/ for five nights, until the long flow/ and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold drove us apart. The deep boiled up/ and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild." Heaney's evocative introduction voices his long-felt attraction to the poem's "melancholy fortitude," describing the decades his rendering took and the use he discovered for dialect terms. It extends in dramatic fashion Heaney's long-term archeological delvings, his dig into the origins of his beloved, conflictedAby politics and placeAEnglish language. (Feb.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

There are over 20 translations of this Old English epic into modern English, from the prose version of E. Talbot Donaldson to the verse renditions of Burton Raffel and Stanley Greenfield. The appearance of this new translation by Nobel Laureate Heaney, and especially its replacement of the Donaldson Beowulf in the Norton Anthology, instantly elevates it in the canon. Recognizing that ordinary native English dialects still contain much of the vocabulary found in Old English, Heaney tries to evoke the diction and syntax of a living language. He captures the alliterative rhythm without monotony (although he loses some of the subtle shifts of mood, making the world of Beowulf seem more primitive than it was). Heaney is especially good at creating the elegiac tone of the work. In all, this is good poetry, if not always true to the original. This bilingual edition contains a valuable introduction by Heaney and a note on names by Alfred David. For public and academic libraries.

-*Thomas L. Cooksey, Armstrong State Coll., Savannah, GA*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Frances Heath:

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Hattie Leclair:

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Albertha Lemons:

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