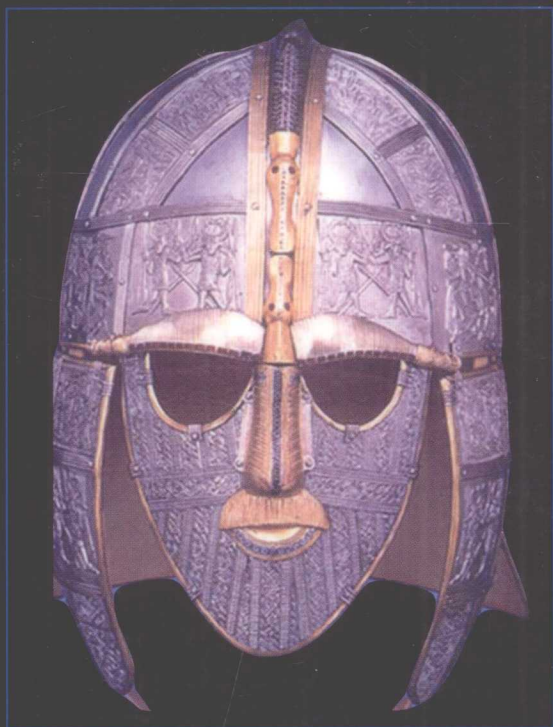


BEOWULF

A PROSE TRANSLATION



TRANSLATED BY E. TALBOT DONALDSON
EDITED BY NICHOLAS HOWE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

BEOWULF
A PROSE TRANSLATION



BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS
CRITICISM
SECOND EDITION

Translated by

E. TALBOT DONALDSON

LATE OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Edited by

NICHOLAS HOWE

LATE OF
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *New York • London*

Copyright © 2002, 1975 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

The text of this book is composed in Electra with the display set in Bernhard Modern.
Composition by Publishing Synthesis Ltd., New York.
Book design by Antonina Krass.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beowulf. English.

Beowulf : a prose translation : contexts, criticism / translated by E. Talbot Donaldson ; edited by Nicholas Howe. — 2nd ed.

p. cm. — (A Norton critical edition)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-393-97406-5 (pbk.)

1. Epic poetry, English (Old)—History and criticism. 2. Epic poetry, English (Old)—Modernized versions. 3. Scandinavia—In literature. 4. Monsters in literature. 5. Dragons in literature. 6. Scandinavia—Poetry 7. Heroes in literature. 8. Monsters—Poetry. 9. Dragons—Poetry. 10. Heroes—Poetry. 11. Beowulf. I. Donaldson, E. Talbot (Ethelbert Talbot), 1910– II. Howe, Nicholas. III. Title.

PR1583.D6 2001

829'.3—dc21

2001030889

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

5 6 7 8 9 0

Preface

Beowulf is the longest extant poem written in Old English or, as it is sometimes called, Anglo-Saxon. At 3,182 lines, *Beowulf* represents about 10 percent of the poetry that survives from the earliest stage of the English language, a period that lasted from about 600 to 1100 C.E. Some of the most basic facts we can know about any work of literature—who wrote it, and when, and where—elude us about *Beowulf*. Scholars have argued for generations about these matters, as is evident from some of the critical discussions included in this edition, but they have also agreed on the extraordinary qualities of the poem. For it is a remarkably vivid and powerful narrative of the hero Beowulf and the world he moves through as a slayer of monsters and ruler of his people.

The poem we call *Beowulf* survives in only one manuscript version, now housed in the British Library and known as Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The editions listed in the bibliography at the end of this volume have facsimile pages of the manuscript from which readers can gain some sense of how the poem appears in its original form, as they can from the reproduction on p. 55 below. Those familiar with beautiful illuminated manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon period, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, may well be surprised at how simple and unadorned the poem seems in Cotton Vitellius. Yet this manuscript is a very precious relic, for had it not survived through the centuries after it was written, which was most likely in the first quarter of the eleventh century, we would know nothing of *Beowulf*.

Cotton Vitellius A.xv. is one of four great manuscripts containing Old English poetry to survive. The others are known as the Exeter Book, after the city in southwestern England where it has long rested; the Vercelli Book, after the city in northern Italy where it was found in the nineteenth century; and the Junius Manuscript, after the Dutch scholar who edited its contents in 1654. Each of these four manuscripts dates to within a generation or so of the year 1000 C.E., and each is written chiefly in the dialect of Old English known as Late West Saxon. While we can roughly date the time when the poems were written down in these manuscripts, we cannot know with much confidence when any one of the poems was first composed. Some may go back hundreds of years to the seventh century, and some of them surely had their origin in the oral poetry of the Anglo-Saxons. Others seem likely to have been first com-

posed as written poems, even if they also display such features of oral poetry as alliteration and formulaic diction.

The first complete edition of *Beowulf* appeared in 1815, and the first translation into Modern English was published in 1837. The poem was, for all intents and purposes, almost unknown between the end of the Anglo-Saxon period and the early nineteenth century. Unlike other medieval works, such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *Beowulf* was not read continuously over the centuries. Indeed, it has entered the canon of English literature only in the last 150 years or so. Since the first translation of the poem into English, there have been at least sixty later versions, as well as renderings into many other modern European languages. The translation presented in this edition, by the late E. Talbot Donaldson, was first published in 1966. At least a dozen others have appeared in the intervening years, including highly readable poetic versions by Seamus Heaney, R. M. Liuzza, and Kevin Crossley-Holland, as well as the well-known novel by John Gardner entitled *Grendel*. Those who find the poem compelling and moving but who cannot read it in the original might want to explore it by comparing several different modern versions. If no single translation can fully capture a poem as subtle as *Beowulf*, several different versions can, when read together, give one something approaching the experience of knowing the poem in the original.

Among the many available versions of *Beowulf*, the Donaldson translation has achieved a notable position and an enduring value within the study of English literature. First done for the widely used *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, it has been published separately and as a Norton Critical Edition in 1975, edited by Joseph F. Tuso. During the last third of the twentieth century, thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of readers first met *Beowulf* in the Donaldson version, and they were well served by its faithful, accurate, and deeply informed prose version of the original poem. No doubt some qualities of the poem must inevitably be lost by any rendering into prose, but much can also be gained. In the case of Donaldson's version, what is gained is a strong sense of the poem's forward motion from the exploits of the young Beowulf in Denmark to his long rule and death at home in Geatland. Moreover, Donaldson was remarkably adept at capturing the verbal texture of the poem, especially its use of variation, in a type of Modern English that was clearly that of the second half of the twentieth century. He avoids the cuteness or pseudomedieval English that mars many older translations of *Beowulf*.

A personal testimonial may help make my point about the abiding value of Donaldson's work. I first read *Beowulf* as an undergraduate in the early 1970s in a rather overblown poetic version that gave little sense of the poem's subtlety. Only after reading Donaldson's translation did I understand that *Beowulf* was a sophisticated poem and not at all the work

of a primitive bard of the Dark Ages. From reading Donaldson's translation, I turned to studying Old English and have been teaching it to students for more than twenty years. Through these years, Donaldson's version has remained for me the prose translation of choice, the one that I recommend to students, colleagues, friends, and strangers when asked to suggest a readable and literal rendition of *Beowulf*.

As *Beowulf* has yielded a wide variety of translations over the years, so it has given rise to a staggering amount of scholarship and criticism. The various bibliographies cited at the end of this volume will allow readers to gain a sense of how much has been written on the poem over the last two centuries. In preparing this new Norton Critical Edition of *Beowulf*, I have set certain terms for choosing critical articles. I have included only complete pieces, whether first published as articles or as chapters in books, so that readers can gain a full understanding of each critic's interpretation of *Beowulf*. They thus will not need to fill in the gaps that inevitably come with any abridgment or excerpting, no matter how skillfully done, of a critical piece. I have also limited the selection to studies published since 1980 so that readers can be exposed to the current conversation in the field about *Beowulf*. But it should be stressed that much work of enduring value on *Beowulf* was published before 1980. Some of these studies are cited in the bibliography. More specifically, readers interested in earlier monuments of *Beowulf* scholarship would do well to read through previous collections of critical readings prepared by Donald K. Fry, Lewis E. Nicholson, Harold Bloom, R. D. Fulk, and Peter S. Baker (as listed in the bibliography). If there were one early critical work on *Beowulf* that most scholars would cite as essential, it would unquestionably be J. R. R. Tolkien's "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," first published in 1936 and frequently reprinted. Readers who know Tolkien as a fiction writer will not be entirely surprised by this essay, for it displays his expertise as an Anglo-Saxonist.

The critical essays collected in this volume offer a wide range of ways to read *Beowulf*. Fred C. Robinson demonstrates how careful attention to the poet's use of apposition, the artful arrangement of synonymous words or phrases, helps to carry the large thematic concerns of the poem. The retrospective quality of the poem, the fact that it looks back to an earlier time in the history of the Germanic tribes, is explored subtly by Roberta Frank in her discussion of the poet's sense of history. The diverse ways in which *Beowulf* does cultural work by depicting forms of social community and folkloric belief systems are treated by John D. Niles through the concept of what he terms "social praxis." In a more psychological reading of the poem, Michael Lapidge focuses on how it creates and sustains the element of terror that is, at least in part, responsible for its immediate appeal as a work of literature. In this study, Lapidge also introduces the reader to Scandinavian poetry that can be seen as culturally analogous to *Beowulf*. In another wide-ranging study, Joyce Hill traces representations

of women in *Beowulf* and other Old English poems in order to debunk stereotypes about them and, yet more important, to suggest how they are to be understood within a larger cultural context. Helen Bennett continues the examination of women and their representation in *Beowulf* by concentrating on a brief and highly puzzling passage. Through this study, the reader will gain a better sense of the difficulties presented by the damaged manuscript of the poem as well as some of the fruitful ways in which contemporary feminist theory may be used to read *Beowulf*. In the final essay, I turn to the problematic issue of dating *Beowulf* and its consequences for how we interpret the poem.

In order to assist readers, I have supplied annotations for technical terms and historical figures that may require explanation. I have also supplied translations of Old English and Latin passages where necessary; these translations appear in square brackets following the passages. I have used the translation by E. Talbot Donaldson for passages of a line or longer from *Beowulf*. A list of abbreviations used throughout this volume for titles of periodicals and dictionaries as well as for linguistic terms appears on pages xv–xvi. Readers should be aware that all line references to *Beowulf* follow the same sequence, so they can locate passages quoted or cited in the critical essays by consulting the running heads given with the translation.

Preparing this volume for publication has pleasantly reminded me that scholarship is a collaborative event. Let me therefore acknowledge with gratitude the encouragement offered to me by the late Joseph F. Tusso, the editor of the first Norton Critical Edition of *Beowulf*, and Carol Bemis of W. W. Norton, who guided my work with patience and discretion. In selecting the critical essays to be used for this edition, I had the great good fortune to have had the advice of Thomas A. Bredehoft, Roberta Frank, Stacy S. Klein, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, Fred C. Robinson, and Alice Sheppard. Thanks are due as well to Timothy J. Lundgren, Robin J. Norris, Dana Oswald, and Cynthia Wittman Zollinger for continually reminding me of how exciting and subtle is this poem we call *Beowulf*. Robert Davis helped me collect materials for this edition and also spent hours with me discussing the articles to be included. I owe him thanks for his care and dedication. For his appointment as my research assistant, I express my gratitude to the English Department at The Ohio State University and its chair, James Phelan.

My deepest debt is to the many students with whom I have read *Beowulf* over the years. Their love for the poem has been sustaining to me as a teacher and scholar, as have their hard questions about it. To them I dedicate this critical edition of *Beowulf*.

The Translation[†]

The chief purpose of this translation is to try to preserve for the reader what the translator takes to be the most striking characteristic of the style of the original: extraordinary richness of rhetorical elaboration alternating with—often combined with—the barest simplicity of statement. The effect of this, impressive though it is, is difficult to analyze; perhaps the principal thing it accomplishes is to keep us constantly aware that while the aspirations of the people concerned are high-heroic, the people themselves are merely people—men with almost all the limitations (*Beowulf*'s great physical strength is an exception) of ordinary mortals. That is, men may rise to the heroism of the rhetorical style, but they are nevertheless always the human beings of the plain style. In order to try to reproduce this effect, it has seemed best to translate as literally as possible, confining oneself to the linguistic and intellectual structure of the original. It is perfectly true that a literal translation such as this is bound to result in a style of modern English prose that was never seen before on land or sea and is not apt to be again—a good example of what Ben Jonson would surely call “no language.” But no received English style that I know, modern or archaic, sounds anything like *Beowulf*: there seems to be no accepted alternate to a literal rendering.

For a good many years prose translators of *Beowulf* chose to use a “heroic” style which at least sounded archaic, for it borrowed liberally from Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and the King James Bible, as well as from later imitators of these. A good many serviceable translations were thus produced, but in general the homogeneousness of their style necessarily proved false to the original by elevating even its simplest statements into highly adorned ones: the hero can perform the commonest actions—like sitting down—only by means of an elaborate periphrasis. More recent translators have eschewed the artificiality of such style and have rendered the poem into what is called “modern colloquial English.” This has resulted in bringing out very effectively the starker side of the poem, its understatements and its directness, but has also given the unfortunate impression that the heavily rhetorical side is

[†] From *Beowulf*, a new prose translation by E. Talbot Donaldson, pp. xii–xv by E. T. Donaldson. Revised for this edition in 1975. Copyright © 1966 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

excrement and unnecessary: heaped-up epithets are reduced, like fractions to be simplified, to one or two terms, the "whale-road" is resolved into what it surely is, the sea, and "*pæt wæs god cyning*" becomes, colloquially but rather donnishly, "He was an excellent king." Decorum expects translators to maintain a consistent point of view through their style, but the *Beowulf* poet (along with most great poets) forges a complex style that simultaneously discloses differing aspects of the same situation; lacking his vision and his language (not to mention his talent), we tend to emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other.

One sentence will illustrate the kind of difficulty the translator of *Beowulf* constantly encounters. It occurs during the hero's fight with Grendel's mother in her underwater hall. The sword Hrunting has failed him; he has grappled with the monster-woman and thrown her to the floor; then he himself stumbles and falls. At this point the poet says, "*Ofsæt þa þone selegyst*": "Then she sat upon the hall-guest." This is a reasonable action, for she is much bigger than he, and is preparing to stab him. Yet if one is using a consistently heroic style, the simple verb "sat"—especially in juxtaposition with the seemingly "epic" epithet "hall-guest"—will simply not do; in order to preserve the translator's and the hero's dignity, Grendel's mother must throw, hurl, fling, or otherwise precipitate herself upon her adversary. If, on the other hand, one is using the colloquial style, then "hall-guest" is an embarrassment, and one is apt to go through the (perfectly correct) semantic process of *hall-guest* = *hall-visitor* or *hall-stranger* = *visitor* or *stranger in the hall* = *intruder*. And "intruder" is in many ways quite satisfactory, but it lacks whatever potential for quick, grim humor the expression "hall-guest" has. Surely something specious has been added if Grendel's mother acts more dramatically than just sitting upon Beowulf, and something good has been lost if he becomes other than a hall-guest.

An honest translator must confess that while he has tried to avoid the defects of his predecessors, he has probably introduced defects of which they were free. My resolute avoidance of such terms as bill, buckler, and byrnie undoubtedly gives the impression that the poet's vocabulary was limited in words for sword, shield, and mailshirt: actually it was so rich that bill, buckler, and byrnie lend only paltry, stopgap aid, and I have thought it better to make the poet monotonous than quaint. At times I have been guiltily aware that an Old English word might be more exactly translated by a polysyllabic Latinate synonym than by the word's modern English monosyllabic descendant which I have preferred, but one is so often absolutely compelled to use Latinisms that I have tried to avoid them whenever there was the slightest possibility of doing so. With words whose potential translations range from the colorless to the highly colored—such as "man: warrior: hero"—I have generally preferred the more modest of the alternates, though it might be argued that I have thus behaved anti-heroically. I am not sure that my feeling that *thou* and

thee are inappropriate in a modern translation may not be idiosyncratic, but it has at least enabled me to evade such monstrosities as “thou achievedest.” I am sorry we have lost the interjection “lo” from modern English: it is enormously useful, and hard to get around for Old English *hwæt*, though I have got around it when I could. While my translation is not intended to be in purely “natural” English, I have avoided unnatural expressions unless they performed some function in rendering the Old English style.

I cannot boast that I have been able to resolve with entire honesty every dilemma presented by the original. Like most translators, I have put in proper names in some places where the poet used only pronouns, have occasionally changed difficult constructions to easy ones, and have altered word order—and thus the poet’s emphasis—in sentences where to preserve the literal would be to obscure the sense. I have also occasionally introduced glosses into the text. For instance, after the Danes and Geats have journeyed from Heorot to Grendel’s mere and have found it boiling with blood—and Aeschere’s head upon the shore—the poet says, “Again and again the horn sang its urgent war-song. The whole troop sat down.” Seen from a realistic point of view, there is nothing surprising about this: the warriors have had a hard trip, and nothing is, for the moment, to be gained by remaining standing. Yet even one who believes that heroic warriors need not always be in furious motion experiences a sense of anticlimax here, and I have wilfully added a gloss: “The whole troop sat down to rest.” A problem of a different sort, to be solved only by suppression of sense, occurs in the Danish coast-guard’s speech to the arriving Geats. After marveling at their boldness and warlike appearance, he says to them (literally): “Hear my simple thought: haste is best to make known whence your comings are.” The thought is, indeed, simple enough, but the expression is highly elaborate, a plain question put in a most formal way that shows at once respect for and defiance of the Geatish warriors. I know of no way to render such shades of meaning in modern English, and my translation makes of the coast-guard a plainer, blunter man than the poet probably conceived. In general I hope, however, that I have not played false too often, and that the reader unfamiliar with Old English may derive from this translation some real sense of the poem’s extraordinary qualities. I have eschewed verse in the same hope, for I am persuaded that only a prose translation, made with no other end in mind than fidelity to the original, can bring out the distinctive qualities of the work. To make it a modern poem is, inevitably, to make it a different poem. The author of one of the best verse translations of *Beowulf* emphasizes that “a creative re-creation [i.e., a poetic translation] is a creation”; no two creative artists can create the same thing. If, on the other hand, a verse translation does not try to be a poem in its own right, then it can only be versification, a literal rendering constantly distracted from literalism by the need to versify, as a more

creative translation is constantly distracted from literalism by the translator's creativity. Rather than try to create a new and lesser poem for the reader, it seems better to offer him in prose the literal materials from which he can re-create the poem.

I should like to thank Miss Mary Carruthers for her great help in checking the translation, correcting errors, and suggesting improvements. To several of my friends who are enormously learned in Old English I am also much indebted for their patient kindness in answering my sometimes naïve questions, but since they did not see the manuscript, I shall not embarrass them by naming them. Two colleagues who did see the manuscript—William Wiatt of Indiana and Albert H. Marckwardt of Princeton—offered most helpful suggestions; I am grateful, both for those that I used and those that I didn't. I tried not to consult other translations during the course of my own work (except in the case of several venerable cruxes), but I was familiar with several of them—especially Clark Hall's—before I began, and I know that they often helped me when I was not aware of their doing so. The translation is based on F. Klaeber's third edition of the poem (1950); in general, the emendations suggested by J. C. Pope, *The Rhythm of Beowulf*, second edition (1966), have been adopted.

E. TALBOT DONALDSON

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations for linguistic terms are used throughout this volume. Words marked with an asterisk (*) in the critical essays are hypothetical or reconstructed forms and are not attested in surviving texts.

eWS	Early West Saxon
ME	Middle English
ModE	Modern English
MS	Manuscript (plural: MSS)
OE	Old English
OHG	Old High German
ON	Old Norse

The following abbreviations for journal and book titles are used throughout this volume.

ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
BTD	Bosworth and Toller, <i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> (3 vols.)
CL	<i>Comparative Literature</i>
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
DAEM	<i>Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
ES _{tn}	<i>Englische Studien</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MHRA Bulletin	<i>Modern Humanities Research Association Bulletin</i>
MLN	<i>Modern Languages Notes</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
NED	<i>New English Dictionary</i> (now called the <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>)
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
PBA	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
PL	<i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>

SBVS	<i>Saga Book of the Viking Society of Northern Research</i>
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
TSLL	<i>Texas Studies in Language and Literature</i>

Helen Bennett • The Female Mourner at Beowulf's Funeral: Filling in the Blanks/Hearing the Spaces	167
Nicholas Howe • The Uses of Uncertainty: On the Dating of <i>Beowulf</i>	179
Glossary of Proper Names	191
Selected Bibliography	195

The Text of
BEOWULF



Beowulf

[Prologue: *The Earlier History of the Danes*]

Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing¹ took mead-benches away from enemy bands, from many tribes, terrified their nobles—after the time that he was first found helpless.² He lived to find comfort for that, became great under the skies, prospered in honors until every one of those who lived about him, across the whale-road,³ had to obey him, pay him tribute. That was a good king.

Afterwards a son was born to him, a young boy in his house, whom God sent to comfort the people: He had seen the sore need they had suffered during the long time they lacked a king. Therefore the Lord of Life, the Ruler of Heaven, gave him honor in the world: Beow⁴ was famous, the glory of the son of Scyld spread widely in the Northlands. In this way a young man ought by his good deeds, by giving splendid gifts while still in his father's house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes. Through deeds that bring praise, a man shall prosper in every country.

Then at the fated time Scyld the courageous went away into the protection of the Lord. His dear companions carried him down to the sea-currents, just as he himself had bidden them do when, as protector of the Scyldings,⁵ he had ruled them with his words—long had the beloved prince governed the land. There in the harbor stood the ring-prowed ship, ice-covered and ready to sail, a prince's vessel. Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, the ring-giver,⁶ in the hollow of the ship, the glorious man beside the mast. There was brought great store of treasure, wealth from lands far away. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly

1. The meaning is probably "son of Scef," although Scyld's origins are mysterious.

2. As is made clear shortly below, Scyld arrived in Denmark as a child alone in a ship loaded with treasures.

3. A kenning, or metaphoric epithet, for the sea.

4. Although the manuscript reads "Beowulf," most scholars now agree that it should read "Beow." Beow was the grandfather of the Danish king Hrothgar.

5. I.e., the Danes ("descendants of Scyld").

6. A traditional epithet for a generous king or lord in Old English poetry.