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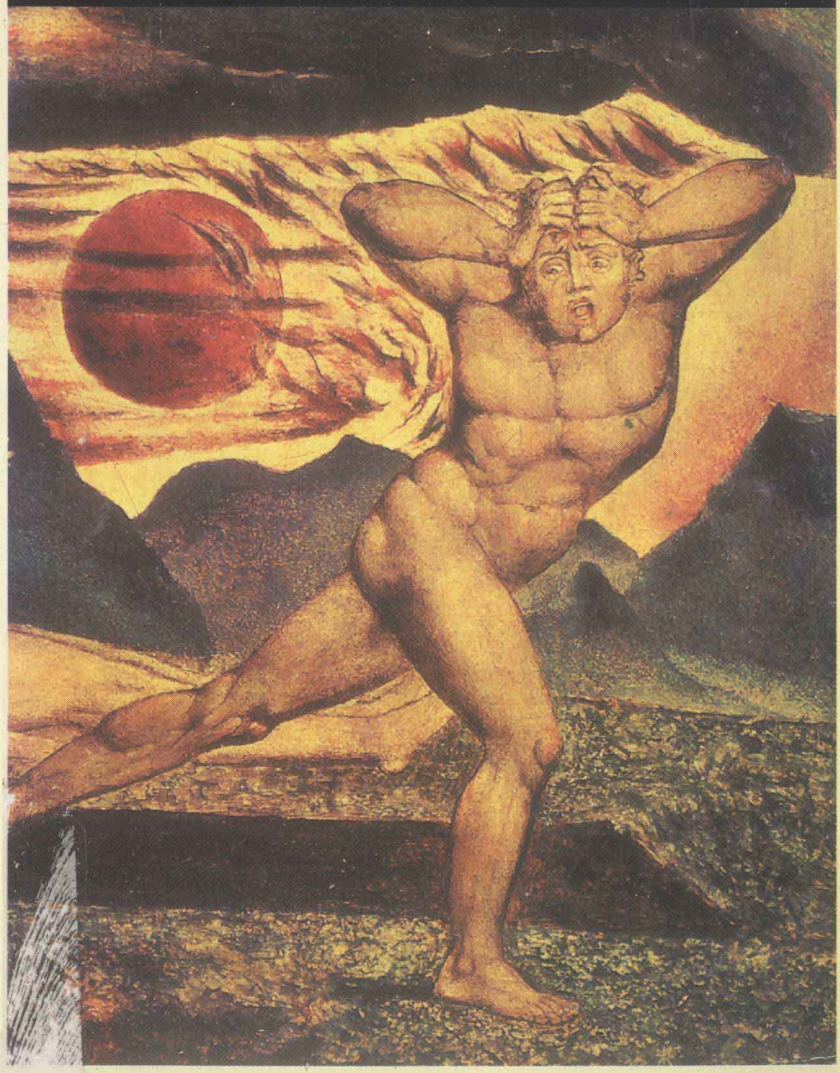
# BEOWULF



# BEOWULF

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# INTRODUCTION

*Beowulf* is the greatest surviving Old English poem, and it is also the longest, with 3,182 lines of verse, more than one-tenth of the verse remaining from Anglo-Saxon times. Other epics are longer – the *Iliad* is five times as long, the *Aeneid* three times – but *Beowulf* is condensed. The text survives in a single manuscript, now in the British Library, into which it was copied along with other texts in about the year 1000. The story is set in a southern Scandinavian world remote from though ancestral to its Anglo-Saxon audience. After 1066 there was no audience for *Beowulf* at the French-speaking court. And the Conquest accelerated changes in English which put the archaic poetic dialect of *Beowulf* out of reach of English audiences. By Chaucer's day, when English had regained parity with French as a major literary medium, the old poem would have been unreadable.

Anglo-Saxon origins became of interest when the Church in England became the Church of England, but it was not until the eighteenth century that examples of Anglo-Saxon verse were printed. *Beowulf* was first edited by Thorkelin, an Icelander in the service of Denmark, who published it in Copenhagen in the year of Waterloo, with a translation into Latin. The first vernacular translation was into Danish, by the poet Gruntvig in 1820. Extracts had appeared in England early in the century, and Tennyson tried his hand at a few lines in 1830–31.

The first English edition of the whole text, by Tennyson's friend Kemble, was published in 1833. There were several scholarly editions in the next hundred years, culminating in the encyclopaedic

editions of F. Klaeber. A better literary understanding of the poem came with J.R.R. Tolkien's British Academy lecture of 1936, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics'. Since then Victorian mediaevalism and the cult of the North have long since passed away, and *Beowulf* has emerged from its antiquarian chrysalis and joined the company of the English poets. It has gained a wide audience, partly through translation and adaptation. As knowledge of older languages becomes rarer, older literature will survive only on grounds of literary merit, that is, of artistry and lasting human interest, and on such grounds *Beowulf* will live.

This edition has a special format in which the text is faced by a page with a very full glossary. It is designed for modern students of the poem, not for students of the editorial problems of its text. Text and procedure are discussed in the Editorial Preface which follows this Introduction.

*Beowulf* opens with an account of Scyld's arrival from the sea, of his life of conquest and his mysterious burial in a ship, an overture that draws us into a past heroic world, a world known to Anglo-Saxon audiences as the world of their ancestors. The subject-matter of the poem is historical and legendary, and its history is the history of the dynasties ruling the Baltic and North Sea coasts in the fifth and sixth centuries. It was from these coasts and in these centuries that the English had come to Britain, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 937 records in a historical retrospect. I translate:

> . . . from the east came
> Angles and Saxons up to these shores,
> Seeking Britain across the broad seas,
> Smart for glory, those smiths of war
> That overcame the Welsh, and won a homeland.

We know from the *Chronicle*, begun under Alfred, that to the rulers of the English kingdoms their continental ancestors were of deep interest, since they ruled by right of conquests made by those ancestors. West-Saxon genealogies go back to Noah via Woden, and include three names mentioned early in *Beowulf* – Scyld, Shef and Beow.


The Geography of *Beowulf*

When in the seventh century the islanders became Christians they sent missionaries to the continent to give the good news to their Germanic cousins. The Anglo-Saxon audience was proud of its ancestors, yet, as the poem says of the Danes, 'they did not know God' (line 180).

We know nothing specific about the milieu of the poem, and little of its provenance. The manuscript in which our text appears was copied about the year 1000 in the classical Late West-Saxon dialect by two scribes, the second of whom took over at line 1939. The three prose texts preceding *Beowulf* in the manuscript describe monsters or giants, and the climax of the poem following *Beowulf*, a paraphrase of the story of Judith, is the beheading of a human monster. Whoever gathered these texts collected monster-stories, but this tells nothing about the milieu of *Beowulf*. It used to be held that the poem was copied from a version of an original composed much earlier, perhaps around the time of Bede's death in 735. But the poem's assimilation of Christian terms now seems to indicate a later date. The recent proposal that the poem was composed after the year 1000 by the scribe who touched up folio 182 is unconvincing since it is evident that this man did not understand the language of the poem very well, probably because he found it archaic.

Questions of composition and transmission are complex and, as the history of the Homeric question shows, not easily open to proof. It is likely that the poem's composition had more than one oral stage and more than one written stage. The poem has a decided unity, but the argument from design does not prove the existence of a single designer. Although it is by no means required that we renounce the idea of the single literary author, to talk of 'the *Beowulf*-poet' is to oversimplify.

For what audience was *Beowulf* composed? It would be odd if the ruling families of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the seventh and eighth centuries had had no stories about their conquering forefathers and continental grandfathers. Indeed we have such stories in early poems such as *Widsith*, a catalogue of the peoples of the migration that followed the fall of Rome, and of their rulers and heroes, including names prominent in *Beowulf*.

The knowing way in which *Beowulf* alludes to tales of Finn and of Ingeld makes it clear that their stories were in oral circulation before there was a written *Beowulf*, and much of the poem may have been available in oral verse tradition before a monk dipped his quill in ink. In which case, the writer who gave the poem its final shape shares the credit of authorship with the unlettered poets who went before him, unclerical poets like those celebrated in the poem. Whoever wrote it, it is likely that a written version substantially similar to the text we have was in existence before the death of King Alfred in 899.

The traditional language of poetic composition is a conglomerate, but the Anglian component which shows through our West-Saxon text has suggested that one stage of the poem's composition took place north of the Thames at a court with Scandinavian ancestral interests. West-Saxon genealogies include names found in *Beowulf*; the Hengest of the poem may be the Hengest who came to Kent in 449; and the Offa of the poem was claimed as an ancestor for Offa of Mercia in the eighth century. So the poem's history too is a conglomerate. The writer of *Beowulf* must be presumed to have been a cleric, for whom the heathen ancestors of his king would have been like Old Testament kings of Israel, such as Saul or David. Some clerics had the same ancestors as their kings.

The action begins in the early sixth century in Zealand at Heorot, the court of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, which is terrorized by a monster. Hrothgar is then helped by Beowulf, a nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats, a people of southern Sweden. The poem ends with the death of Beowulf in Geatland after his fight against a dragon. The Geats now expect to be attacked by their neighbours the Swedes and also by the Merovingian Franks, who had been raided by Hygelac. The turning point for the Geats in the poem was Hygelac's death in a rash expedition against the Frisians and the Hetware on the northern edge of the Frankish empire. Hygelac's death, four times recalled in the poem, is recorded late in the sixth century by Gregory of Tours in his *Historia Francorum*, and also in an eighth-century history of the Franks. The

death of the historical Hygelac must have happened in about the year 520.

What *Beowulf* relates of the Danes, Swedes and Geats, then, has a strong basis in the events of history, though a history shaped in legendary patterns. Hrothgar was the legendary king who held court at Lejre and founded the town of Roskilde, still the burial place of Danish kings. The account of life at Hrothgar's hall Heorot is given the gloss of epic poetry, but also has its value as social history. The poem concerns the dynastic history of Denmark, Geatland and Sweden over two or three generations, and the names and events fit with other northern sources for this period.

The poem itself deals with legend rather than history, however, and is called after a hero who is more mythical than historical. In no other source do we find the name Beowulf (or Biowulf, as he is called by the second scribe of the manuscript). Courageous and wise, he is as strong as thirty men and a champion swimmer. Repaying a favour done to his father, he goes to Hrothgar and volunteers to fight Grendel at night with his bare hands. He dives into a lake to seek out Grendel's mother in her lair. Obliged later to take the throne of Geatland, he rules well for fifty years. When a dragon attacks his people, he meets it in single combat. The bold and magnanimous hero becomes a peace-loving and generous king. Monster-haunted old Scandinavia was a suitable place for such adventures and such a man.

There are two narratives in the poem, the story of the northern dynasties and Beowulf's own story. The dynastic history is also the far-back family history of those who were the patrons of poetry and of its audience. Then there is the heroic story of Beowulf, an archetype not an ancestor. He has no son, but represents the best that a hero could be and do in one lifetime. The pattern of that life is a mythical one. Supposedly lazy in youth, he becomes a glorious monster-slayer, then a champion of his king, then a king beloved of his people. At the end of his peaceful reign he kills the dragon; but he is a man, and must die.

The dynastic and the personal narratives compare the life of

the heroic age with the life of a hero: what the experience of living in the heroic age had been like, and what the ideal hero could be like. The Anglo-Saxons looked for ethical wisdom in their poems, and this poem is preoccupied with the fate of heroes, of dynasties and of nations. There is a post-imperial perspective on the eventual fall of Heorot and the impending extinction of the Geats. The mode of the poem is retrospective from the first: 'Listen! We have heard of the glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes, how in former days those princes accomplished glorious deeds.' Such a perspective comes not simply from the uncertainty of life in the Dark Ages, nor from the sobriety which a review of tribal history might induce in a reflective historian of the North. The fall of the Roman Empire had been read by Augustine in the light of the Apocalypse, and we see the action of the poem in the grey light of the latter days of the heroic age. Insofar as the gnomic commentary of the poem is clerical, it is a Mirror for Magistrates of the post-heroic age, held up for kings and counsellors. The portrait of the noble Beowulf is surrounded by portraits of less ideal heroes and kings: Hygelac is rash, Heremod a tyrant, Finn and Hrothulf treacherous; Ongentheow is a terrible enemy. The noble Hrothgar confesses to Beowulf that he himself had grown complacent in his prosperity.

Beowulf tells Hygelac that Hrothgar used to recite poems about the past which were both *soth* and *sarlic*, true and painful. The second half of the poem relates the Geat-Swedish wars, ending in the messenger's true forecast of pain to come: the Geats were absorbed into the Swedish empire. Heroic obligations were often in conflict in a warrior society of tribal kingdoms: the law of hospitality and the law of vengeance for a lord or a kinsman; the duty to avenge a father and the duty to a wife. The Danish princess Hildeburh, standing at the pyre of her husband, her brother and her son, is an unforgettable figure of the suffering entailed in heroic ideas of duty, a suffering constantly renewed by vengeance. The blood-feud unravelled the 'peace-weaving' bond of dynastic marriages such as the marriage of Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru to Ingeld. No sooner is Heorot built than we are reminded that it will be burnt down

because of the hatred of those who have bound themselves to each other by oaths. Some of the ethical problems brought into the poem are extreme cases: after one of the sons of Hrethel the Geat has killed another in an archery accident, the father dies of grief, for this killing can neither be avenged nor settled by *wergild*. Some things cannot honourably be avoided: king Heardred of the Geats pays with his life for sheltering the exiled heirs of the neighbouring Swedish kingdom. This is almost as if *Macbeth* had ended with the usurper killing Edward the Confessor. An epic is also a tribal encyclopaedia, and *Beowulf* is a lexicon of the warnings offered by history to heroes and rulers. Many of the allusions and episodes of the poem are lost at first on a modern reader, and some of them will remain lost. It is unlikely that a later Anglo-Saxon audience would have recognized every tragic irony with the clarity of a well-instructed audience of *Oedipus Rex*. But they would have taken the general point of the constant comparisons and caught the tone of the allusions.

Scholars have thrown light on most of the many obscure references of *Beowulf*, so that the remaining difficulties are local, though not negligible. The general narrative method of the poem used to perplex scholars looking for a *Beowulfiad* with classically subordinated episodes. It is now understood that the episodes and stories told in parallel to Beowulf's own story are not digressions. Allusive and locally opaque to us, they are not told for their own sake but reflect the main theme. These comparisons show the imperfection, cost and violence of heroic life over time, whereas Beowulf's almost mythical life-cycle shows the ideal subordination of heroic virtue to the common good. It is noticeable, however, that the episodes related when Beowulf is a mature king are more historical and less legendary than when he was a young hero. These later stories of war are also less encouraging. In the introduction to my verse translation of *Beowulf* I remarked that Beowulf's two away wins were followed by a home defeat. Whatever the fortunes of any English descendants they may have had, the Geats, unlike the Danes, the Franks and the Swedes, were to be relegated by history to a lower division.

Though the names are unfamiliar to us, the episodes are told as if familiar, and told with an eye to thematic relevance rather than to chronological exposition: the second Geat-Swedish war is recalled before the first. Unstraightforwardness is found also in the style of the poem. Old English verse (see the Note on Metre) is in a uniform measure, each line a balance of two-stress phrases. Oral composition formed a style in which the sense constantly advances and consolidates, states a theme and varies it. Even the narration of an action as simple as Beowulf's voyage to Denmark is marked by variation of sense within symmetry of sound. And narrative recapitulations (as when Beowulf tells Hygelac about his time in Denmark) do not merely repeat material but add meaning. This variation of sense narrowly escapes repetition, and avoids straightforwardness by an ingenuity which can seem perverse. *Beowulf* is hard to translate into modern English prose, because the word-order and element-order of modern speech favour a straight march along the line of sense. Even the plain verdict on Scyld's reign – *thæt wæs god cyning* – is a poetic understatement. The diction of Old English verse is traditional and archaic compared with that of Old English prose. The audience seem to have been accustomed to expect that things should rarely be taken at face value. They valued wisdom, the enigmatic as well as the plain. Riddling was very popular with the Anglo-Saxon hierarchy of Bede's day, and the riddle is the clue to Anglo-Saxon verse style: it needs to be unknotted.

In a poem from such a remote world, a poem which looks backward rather than forward, difficulties of cultural access remain for the modern reader. The unique is not easy to assimilate. *Beowulf* is set in a period of which records are scarce, and was composed in a period of history known to few. It is part of a literature which, when studied as literature, has to be studied without much context. Access to *Beowulf* can admittedly be gained also via the generic literary category of the epic poem, but Homer and Virgil are not well known to most teachers of English literature, at least in Britain. And so, for the student and general reader, Beowulf's tomb stands on a headland at the far end of the Middle Ages, beyond the

Norman Conquest. Between it and the next literary monument, which may be Shakespeare rather than Chaucer, lies a gulf plied by monsters. Here be dragons. We do not know what to make of dragons, or of fairy-tales. Grendel, his mother and the dragon show evil as physically manifest in the world, which is contrary to liberal literary convention, though not to the realities of modern history. We wonder at the monsters, and wonder what they represent.

Grendel is a house-troll promoted from folk-tales: the ghost of the unburied who haunts Icelandic farm-houses. A man-eater from the fens, he has eyes of fire, nails like steel, a grip to tear you apart and a dragon-skin sack to put you in. As his name suggests, he has grinding teeth. He is mixed beast, spirit and man. Feral in habit, he wanders the margins of earth and water, and dwells beyond them. He is a demon from hell. And he is also human, though of giant stature and without speech and reason. He has no lord and no table manners, and does not know the use of arms. He is of the kin of Cain, the first-born man, marked by God for his fratricide and driven out from mankind. Grendel hates the sound of the feast in Heorot, with its song of creation. His mother is weaker, but formidable enough in her hall, which has fire and air, though reached through water. Both monsters are proof against ordinary human swords.

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish, as Shakespeare's Antony says, which implies that we know what dragons look like. Reptilian fire-breathing treasure-guarding dragons were met by such classical heroes as Jason. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that in Northumbria fiery dragons were seen flying in the air in the year 793. They fly at night and can strike like lightning to set fire to houses. Bible commentaries had linked the serpent of Eden with the dragon of the Apocalypse. In the popular scene of the harrowing of hell, Satan is a dragon. St Michael and St George slay dragons. The Northern dragon dwelt in a mound, jealous of his gold. Beowulf's killer is a classic dragon, more visible than Grendel, and more symbolic.

How far did the audience of *Beowulf* believe in such monsters? In a world of unexplained wonders the natural is not divided from the supernatural, yet we should not exaggerate the credulity of the English hierarchy under archbishops like Theodore of Tarsus. Gregory the Great, who sent the Angles the gospel, taught that we must believe its miracles, but that we should not expect miracles in our age. Bede recounts many miracles from the past, not from his own day. One approach to a solution is offered when the despairing Danes sacrifice to their heathen idols at *Beowulf*, line 175. The heathen god is identified with the slayer of souls, the devil, in the tradition of the representation of false gods in the Old Testament. The poem presents its world as a kind of ancestral Old Testament, a heroic age under a former dispensation, where wonders are to be expected.

Insofar as the audience thought of the monsters allegorically, Grendel and his mother are possessed by the *invidia* which leads to violence and feud, the curse of heroic society. They are kindred of Cain, unlike the dragon, which is elemental and bestial, neither human nor demon. It destroys to avenge not the death of kindred but the theft of a possession. If Grendel is moved by a Cain-like hatred to murder sleepers after the feast, the dragon kills for a stolen cup. Its outraged possessiveness offends against the magnanimity of a Beowulf. For the hero himself, the dragon represents death, a terror from which he does not flinch.

Before he dies Beowulf asks to see the gold, which he has won for the Geats but which proves useless both to him and to them. Beowulf's epitaph is that of all kings he was the mildest, the gentlest and the dearest to his people – and the keenest for fame. But is he too keen on the dragon's famous gold? Could it even be that we should regard him as damned? This is a problem for some critics rather than for the poem, which can be explicit but sometimes takes care not to be. It is clear that Beowulf lives a noble life and is prepared to die for his people, but that he cannot know God in the way the audience can. The fact that Beowulf lives under the old dispensation limits his understanding but not his stature under the

heavens. The poem allows a Christian perspective upon the heroic world, a humane but hard world, in which valour is the supreme virtue and discretion its better and rarer part. *Beowulf* is a heroic poem: it gives us the heroic world, good and bad, and a hero whom we can admire.

## EDITORIAL PREFACE

The text is faced by a very full set of word-by-word glosses. Footnotes are designed to give on the page all essential information, except for what is found in the Glossary of Proper Names at the end of the book.

The text of *Beowulf* is found in MS Cotton Vitellius A.XV in the British Library. This West-Saxon MS of c.1000, containing four other texts about monsters and bound up with an unrelated MS, came into the collection of the antiquarian Sir Robert Cotton, who died in 1631. Earlier it had passed through the hands of Lawrence Nowell, Dean of Lichfield, for the MS bears his signature, dated 1563. Before this its history is unknown. The MS, already scuffed on the outside of some quires, was damaged by a fire at the Cottonian Library in 1731 and some of its edges have since crumbled. The received text presented in modern editions contains many readings preserved in two transcripts of the Cotton MS made in 1786–87 by the Icelander Thorkelin: one transcript was made by a copyist, the other by Thorkelin himself. The base text of the poem is the product of the collation of the MS with the transcripts, but this base text has required much emendation by editors and scholars. Of the 3,182 lines of the poem in modern editions, about 750 print a reading restored from a transcript or emended by an editor. Counting words rather than lines, there are about 20,000 Old English words in a modern printed text. Of these, more than one thousand have been restored or emended. Wrenn's edition, for example, accepts emendations from over thirty different sources. Restorations and emendations to the MS text are proposed and accepted where

editors think the text is defective or cannot be made to make sense. Such changes to the text of the MS are often small and may seem entirely convincing, but it should be realized that as many as one in twenty of the words in the edited text are in some respect restored or improved.

As in other manuscripts of Old English verse, the text is untitled and written out continuously as prose, using a word-division and punctuation which do not correspond to modern conventions. Modern editions print the Old English text in sentences which follow modern conventions of punctuation and capitalization. These repunctuated sentences are further arranged in lines of verse, usually leaving a gap in the middle of the line as a prompt to the reader to read it as verse. Moreover, many Old English words in the MS are silently joined up in modern editions and printed as one word, sometimes with the modern device of the hyphen to indicate a compound. Other MS words are silently divided and printed as a hyphenated word, or as two words. Modern editions in this respect differ more from the MS than do most modern editions of classical texts. Finally, there are the Old English letter-forms. A student who sees that the Old English letter-forms for 'th' are preserved in modern editions may suppose that these editions are especially close to MS forms. But editors do not preserve other Old English letter-forms, such as the 'w' form, which are as strange to modern eyes as the 'th' forms. A serious student might examine a facsimile page of the MS to ascertain how far it differs from modern texts. This is best seen in the Early English Text Society facsimile and transcription by Norman Davis. Individual folios are reproduced in other editions.

The text of the Penguin English Poets edition of *Beowulf* is based on the editorial tradition reflected in the standard English-language editions of Klaeber and Wrenn-Bolton, which print the readings of scores of earlier editors and scholars. As explained above, editors have to grant readings from Thorkelin's transcripts an authority not far below that of the MS. This edition has also had the benefit of Professor Swanton's edition and has benefited more especially from the edition by Mr George Jack, prepared in