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Michael Alexander is Berry Professor of English Literature at the University of St Andrews. His book of translations, *The Earliest English Poems*, appeared in Penguin Classics in 1966. Other publications include *Old Riddles from the Exeter Book* and *A History of Old English Literature*, as well as *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* and *Twelve Poems*. He is Associate Editor of *Agenda*.

This translation of *Beowulf* has been broadcast by the B.B.C. and the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

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ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

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A VERSE TRANSLATION BY
MICHAEL ALEXANDER

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

'In a place far from libraries I have often read *Beowulf* for pleasure'[1]

THE Old English *Beowulf* has several claims on the attention of modern readers: it is a poem of barbaric splendour and artistry; an eloquent celebration of a heroic life and death; an 'action' of epic sweep and scope. This translation of *Beowulf* began as an attempt to catch in modern English some of that sense of masterful power communicated by the verses of the original Old English poem. As the attempt to imitate the local triumphs of verse and syntax was prolonged, something of the deeper pattern and the real substance and significance of *Beowulf* began to reveal itself. This introduction is an attempt to suggest something of the character of this famous but not very well-known work.

Many people who are not Anglo-Saxon scholars have attempted to translate *Beowulf*, despite its difficulties and its unfamiliarity, and I imagine that they were first of all attracted, as I was, by its sustained energy as poetry: it is an utterance of power. Much of this characteristic power and beauty comes from what I take to be the traditional poetic and narrative forms of public oral performance. Like the 'winged words' of Homer, *Beowulf* was composed to be projected in public performance – to be sung or spoken aloud. It is written after the unmistakable style of oral poetry, a highly-developed medium evolved in and for oral composition and performance, which here can be seen in the first stage of its long adaptation to writing. *Beowulf* is the first large poem in English to survive this transplanting from an oral to a literary mode: it is the beginning of English literature.

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It is also the end of the epic verse traditions of what might be called English pre-literature. *Beowulf,* then, is a gate into the pre-literate (and pre-Christian) past, through which we cannot go, though we can see a good deal. It is from this Janus-like status as an epic both oral and literary that the powerful and unique character of the poem arises.

Whatever its genesis may have been, *Beowulf,* as I have suggested, is a very considerable poem, and it can stand on its own merits without benefit of introduction by a translator. Its splendid isolation at the beginning of our literature has, however, proved something of a mixed blessing so far as its reputation is concerned. It happens that *Beowulf* is the only long heroic poem to survive complete in Old English. It is therefore a document of prime philological, cultural and historical – as well as literary – interest, and is eminently 'worth studying'. For a variety of pedagogical reasons *Beowulf* was mounted as a sort of a dinosaur in the entrance hall of English Literature. Until recently those who wished to study English at university were only allowed to proceed after a minute examination of the epidermis of this sacred monster – or rather of its front end, for the last third of the poem was rarely used as a translation exercise. In most of those who entered into the promised land of modern literature there survived a belated curiosity about the beast whose latter end they had never properly seen. But too often this interest withered away into a ritual academic joke at the expense of Grendel's mother. Some of the mud that was so zealously slung at the old 'crib and gobbet' approach seems to have stuck, very unfairly, to the image of the unoffending poem.

Such an approach to *Beowulf* neglected what I have tried to convey in my translation – that it is composed in epic verse. The emphasis of this introductory essay is upon *Beowulf* as a poem – as an epic poem. Specific aspects of the poem are also addressed – briefly – in the notes; but any serious student of

its formidable minor complexities will, of course, seek help from the scholarly commentators on this much-edited work.

First, the few ascertainable facts about the poem and how it has come down to us. *Beowulf* survives in only one version, in a manuscript now in the British Museum. This copy was probably made by scribes of about the year 1000, and the language is the 'classical' late West-Saxon of the Wessex of Ethelred and Aelfric. The poem, first called *Beowulf* in 1805, was first printed in 1815. Like other Anglo-Saxon poems *Beowulf* is written out as continuous prose divided into numbered sections. It runs to 3,182 verses, which form one-tenth of the surviving Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus and make it the longest Old English poem. *Beowulf* probably first assumed its present shape in the eighth century, not in Wessex but north of the Thames in Mercia or Northumbria, since the traditional composite language in which it lives seems to be more Anglian than Saxon. *Beowulf*'s literary composition is traditionally placed in the Northumbria of the age of Bede, who died in 735, though recently the less well documented Mercia of King Offa, who reigned from 757 to 796, has found its supporters. The poem itself is set in the southern Scandinavia of the fifth and sixth centuries, and contains no reference to the British Isles or to New Testament Christianity. However, as a finished literary work it is almost universally held to be the product of a relatively sophisticated and Christian Anglian court – though one that had evidently not yet repudiated its ancestral links with the Germanic peoples across the North Sea. (The Viking sack of Lindisfarne in 793 would cause the English to think differently of their un-Christian cousins.) As it is, *Beowulf* is taken from the communal word-hoard of the northern Germanic peoples, and it is obvious that, among the Anglian settlers, the story of the poem, and the tales involved with it, must have circulated and developed orally for a long

time before they were sorted out and set into their present arrangement and could receive their present focus and ultimate literary form.

The main story of *Beowulf* is a simple one. It is the story of the youth and age of a hero. In youth Beowulf achieves glory in a foreign land by fighting and killing first the monster Grendel in King Hrothgar's hall and then Grendel's mother in an underwater cave. In age, having ruled his country well for fifty years, Beowulf goes singlehanded to fight a dragon who is destroying his people. At the end of the fight both Beowulf and the dragon are dead, and the poem ends with his funeral and a prophecy of disaster for his people, the Geats. This heroic legend is entangled with a set, or several sets, of tales we find in other, later, Germanic histories, sagas and poems. For example, the death of Beowulf's lord, Hygelac, in a raid on the Franks is recorded as occurring in about the year 521 in Bishop Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, written only a generation later than the event. Other kings and tribes of the poem are likewise known to history, though Beowulf himself does not appear elsewhere. The tale of his exploits against Grendel and Grendel's mother, ultimately drawn from folklore, is related, under a different form, of Grettir the Strong, the eleventh-century Icelandic outlaw. In various ways, Germanic history or legend of the heroic Age of Migration illuminate and make meaningful almost every incident and name in *Beowulf* – and there are many of them. The network of stories around the three central encounters lends the life of the monster-slaying hero a much wider and more complicated significance. The richness and importance of these references are also responsible for the poem's initial difficulties of allusion and structure.

It cannot be denied that *Beowulf* is in many ways a difficult poem, and would have remained an inaccessible one without the concentrated elucidatory efforts of generations of scholars.

Its language and its allusions seem more unfamiliar than those of its French eleventh-century counterpart, the *Song of Roland*, and possibly more unfamiliar than the language and world of reference of Homer in the eighth century B.C. The Norman Conquest and the profound changes in Western European attitudes that began in the twelfth century robbed Old English literature of its posterity. Whatever the reason, the world to which *Beowulf* refers will at first seem strange, archaic and 'unclassical' to modern English readers. It is no accident that the first translation of the poem was not into English but Danish (Gruntvig's *Bjowulfs Drape* in 1820). Despite the efforts of William Morris (who translated the poem in 1895) and the Chadwicks, it is still the scholar and not the imaginative writer who shows us round the world of northern history and legend. J. R. R. Tolkien is the exception that proves the rule. His 1936 British Academy lecture '*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics' has cast a spell over most subsequent critics of the poem. But the common reader, however full of Keats's 'negative capability', may at first find the names of the heroes as strange as their troll-slaying activities. And then, the grafting of Christian comment onto this unfamiliar world of noble wrestlers can at times produce a bizarre effect. 'In *Beowulf*,' W. P. Ker remarked, 'the hero and the dragon, under the influence of literary convention, pass together from "this transitory life".'

It is prudent to give the devil of prejudice his due. But *Beowulf* really needs no apology; it rises easily above its apparatus. The dying speech of Beowulf to his young helper Wiglaf has the authentic epic amplitude:

> 'Bid men of battle build me a tomb
> fair after fire, on the foreland by the sea
> that shall stand as a reminder of me to my people,
> towering high above Hronesness
> so that ocean travellers shall afterwards name it

> Beowulf's barrow, bending in the distance
> their masted ships through the mists upon the sea.'

(ll. 2802-8)

Like the barrow, the poem *Beowulf* is a monument to the hero,
a massive, elaborate and conspicuous monument containing
gold. As the twelve Geat warriors ride round the barrow, they
utter the death-lament for the hero: it is the ground bass of
the poem.

> Then the warriors rode around the barrow,
> twelve of them in all, athelings' sons.
> They recited a dirge to declare their grief,
> spoke of the man, mourned their King.
> They praised his manhood and the prowess of his hands,
> they raised his name; it is right a man
> should be lavish in honouring his lord and friend,
> should love him in his heart when the leading-forth
> from the house of flesh befalls him at last.

> This was the manner of the mourning of the men of the Geats,
> sharers in the feast, the fall of their lord:
> they said that he was of all the world's kings
> the gentlest of men, and the most gracious,
> the kindest to his people, the keenest for fame.

(ll. 3069-182)

They said that he was *lof-geornost*, 'the most eager for praise'
... This desire for 'a name that shall never die beneath the
heavens', for a personal immortality, is the motive that drives
a hero. When he is at the mercy of Grendel's mother or of
the Dragon, Beowulf thinks of his glory; he is *mærtha
gemyndig*, 'mindful of his glorious deeds' – Homer's *klea
andrōn*, 'the glorious deeds of men'. This is the primary theme
of all heroic poetry: the prowess, strength and courage of the
single male, undismayed and undefeated in the face of all
adversaries and in all adventures. The hero surpasses other

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men, and his *aristeia* is rewarded by fame. He represents the
ultimate of human achievement in a heroic age, and embodies
its ideal. Though he must die, his glory lives on.

Beowulf is a heroic poem in the simple sense that it celebrates
the actions of its protagonist. Beowulf, son of Edgetheow,
is the very type of a hero in that it is his eagerness to seek out
and meet every challenge alone and unarmed that makes him
glorious in life and brings him to his tragic death. He also
has a hero's delight in his own prowess and a hero's magna-
nimity to lesser men.

Beowulf is a typical heroic poem not only in its central figure
but also in its world and in its values. The warriors are either
feasting or fighting, they are devoted to glee in hall or glory
in the field, and their possessions are gold cups or gold armour,
the outward and visible signs of that glee and glory. The
society of *Beowulf* is such as Hesiod describes in his account of
the age of the heroes, which intervened between the bronze
and iron ages:

> A godlike race of heroes, who are called
> The demi-gods – the race before our own.
> Foul wars and dreadful battles ruined some;
> Some sought the flocks of Oedipus, and died
> In Cadmus' land, at seven-gated Thebes;
> And some, who crossed the open sea in ships,
> For fair-haired Helen's sake, were killed at Troy.
> These men were covered up in death, but Zeus
> The son of Kronos gave the others life
> And homes apart from mortals, at Earth's edge.
> And there they live a carefree life, beside
> The whirling Ocean, on the Blessed Isles.[2]

Heroic society is simple: a lord in peace and war is the
'shepherd of his people', *folces hyrde* (Homer's *poimeen laōn*).
He gives them shelter, food and drink in his hall; he is their
'ring-giver' and 'gold-friend' in peace and their 'shield' and

'helmet' in war. The warriors 'earn their mead' and their armour by their courage and loyalty in war. Ideally, there is complete solidarity between a king and his people (*folc*).

Hero-tales or heroic poems do not usually remain at the level of simple adventure stories. Even in later medieval romances or in Westerns the heroic code is usually complicated and its values tested by a clash of loyalties: most of the northern heroic tales involve a conflict between the absolute obligation to revenge a slain kinsman or lord and other obligations such as are contracted by being someone's host or guest, or by taking oaths of fealty, of alliance or of marriage. Most of these themes are raised in *Beowulf*, but usually in the inter-related set of stories which support the simple central action; these stories are alluded to rather than related fully. There is a marked contrast between the fullness of epic narration in the central action and the laconic ellipses in which the poem alludes to other well-known tales from the cousinhood of northern story.

This cluster of outside episodes sets the story of Beowulf's life in a much larger context. The development of the foreground story is slow and simple; the episodes are arranged around and behind it, and lend a depth and complexity to the whole. In the simplest of them Beowulf is compared to Sigemund, the greatest of dragon-slayers, and contrasted favourably with the violent Heremod. In the most complicated of them we learn of the series of conflicts between Beowulf's people, the Geats, and the Swedes. These Swedish wars are expressed in terms of a blood feud between the two royal houses over three generations. The blood feuds between the Danes and the Heathobards, and again between the Danes and the Frisians, make two more episodes: both are stories of how a marriage-alliance fails to heal an ancient hatred. Two other episodes deal with murder within the kindred: one tells of an accidental fratricide; the other foreshadows the deliber-