

BEOWULF

A VERSE TRANSLATION



TRANSLATED BY SEAMUS HEANEY
EDITED BY DANIEL DONOGHUE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Translated by

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Preface

This Norton Critical Edition differs from others because the literary text at its center carries a double identity. The Old English *Beowulf* is a verse narrative that survives in a manuscript transcribed around the year 1000, but the version printed here is Seamus Heaney's poetic translation from the cusp of the year 2000. Both deserve to be read as literary texts, but the fact that one translates the other sets up an intriguing dynamic involving interpretation, poetic invention, and fidelity to the source text.

Over sixty translations of *Beowulf* have appeared since the early nineteenth century, but none has caught the reading public's attention as much as Heaney's. Given this translation's reception, it is remarkable how little Heaney's *Beowulf* concedes to the contemporary reader. A moment's thought will reveal extensive differences between the poem's medieval and current audiences, yet Heaney does not provide a new or updated version of an old story but the old story itself. Obscure allusions, abrupt transitions, and words lost because of damage to the manuscript remain as problematic as they ever were. No episodes or characters are added or dropped. Even when Heaney's verse line adopts a different rhythm (ll. 1070–1159), the correspondence with the Old English remains close. Both the old poem and the new poem end on line 3182.

What sets Heaney's apart from other translations, however, is the language. His "Introduction" explains how, when he was searching for the "enabling note" to give the right voice to his project, he made the surprising turn to the speech of some older relatives in Ulster. It was a bold choice, but it enables him to make a clean break with the scholarly glossaries, which have a way of insinuating their formal, literary, and slightly archaic language into most *Beowulf* translations. The choice of a rural Ulster dialect carries ideological and political consequences that will be discussed elsewhere. Of more immediate concern is the odd fact that the translation requires footnotes to gloss its language, even for the intended audience. Most of the words in question are Hibernicisms, that is, usages characteristic of the English spoken in Ireland—or more specifically the English Heaney recalls from his Ulster relatives. Not all of the words are Irish in

origin; some go back to Scandinavian languages and others to Old English. Perhaps the overriding lesson to be learned from the language that Heaney fashions is that all dialects have an equal claim on the remote origins of English because they all have a parallel history. The voice of the Scullions is as adequate to the task as Received Pronunciation or any other variety of English. On a more practical level, the simple task of looking up a glossed word may remind the reader that an older *Beowulf* stands behind Heaney's poem.

Beowulf is a poem of many dimensions. Over the years it has been assigned to the genres epic, heroic narrative, and folk-tale, and it incorporates a variety of other poetic forms such as creation hymn, elegy, gnomic verse, and heroic boast. While it is clear that the *Beowulf* poet was drawing from traditional sources, it is equally clear that most of those sources were oral and are thus unavailable today. The great exception is the Bible, which provides the story of Cain and Abel and Noah's flood. So the material in the "Contexts" section, immediately after the poem, includes explanatory material (such as genealogies of the various royal families) and analogues (such as an episode from a fourteenth-century Icelandic saga).

The "Translator's Introduction" and the final essay in this volume address the process of translation and situate Heaney's *Beowulf* within the trajectory of his career as a poet. While the other critical essays were written with the Old English poem in mind, they work well with Heaney's translation. Most of the *Beowulf* criticism that has accumulated over the years pays close attention to the language of the poem, but because the readers of this volume are not expected to know Old English, the essays selected do not rely on sustained close readings and instead address broad themes. Each piece includes its own literal prose translations, which can provide an interesting point of comparison with Heaney's, because every translation is also an interpretation.

The opening sentence of the "Translator's Introduction" indicates a period of about 350 years for the composition of *Beowulf*, "some time between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century of the first millennium." The interval is so extensive that, if accepted at face value, it would frustrate any attempt to historicize the poem, because Anglo-Saxon England was anything but a static society from the years 650 to 1000—an interval equivalent to that from John Milton to the present day. The range reflects the current lack of consensus among *Beowulf* scholars and signals that (for the purposes of his translation) Heaney prefers to remain noncommittal about the issue. For much of the twentieth century, there was a rough consensus favoring an earlier date of composition, often expressed as "early-eighth century," but since about 1980 the issue

has undergone intensive scrutiny, which has in some cases cast doubt on the earlier certainties and in others found new advocates for specific periods within the larger span. The critical essays included in this volume reflect the shift away from the earlier consensus: the older essays confidently assume an early date of composition, while the more recent ones are more circumspect on the matter.

J. R. R. Tolkien's "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" has been the most influential reading of the poem since it was published over fifty years ago. Arguing against a clumsy historicism in earlier *Beowulf* criticism, Tolkien makes a spirited case for the artistic merits of the poem. Today even those who take issue with Tolkien or who feel that the field has moved on have to reckon with the essay's influence. Jane Chance's essay offers a foil to Tolkien, both in its attention to Grendel's mother (whom Tolkien ignores) and in its gendered reading of Beowulf's struggle with her. What it shares with Tolkien is an admiration for the poem's artistry. John Leyerle compares the interlace motif prevalent in early insular art with the non-linear strands of narrative in *Beowulf* to shed light on its aesthetic principles.

Beowulf is usually seen as a fictional character who moves in a world of myth and legend, but Roberta Frank's essay reminds us that the poem shows a sophisticated historical vision that avoids anachronism and even extends a sense of the past to its characters. The essays by Fred C. Robinson and Thomas Hill complement one another in addressing the poem's religious affiliations. Previous generations of scholars erected a simplistic pagan vs. Christian dichotomy and argued for one or the other as dominant. Both Robinson and Hill, on the other hand, assume that the narrative voice is Christian, but they offer readings that are more nuanced than the older dichotomies. Leslie Webster provides a different kind of context for *Beowulf* by using archaeology to explore the material culture of the poem.

While the other essays focus on the Old English *Beowulf*, my essay suggests that Heaney's turn to *Beowulf* is in many ways a return to the language that has always informed his poetry. His *Beowulf* self-consciously reverses the movement of colonization by using an Irish dialect to appropriate a foundational text of English literary history, but over and above the linguistic politics it is also a gesture of deep respect from one master poet to another across the expanse of a millennium.

DANIEL DONOGHUE

Acknowledgments

Although the author of *Beowulf* is no longer around to receive expressions of gratitude, I have the rare privilege of thanking the poet's shoulder-companion in this volume, Seamus Heaney, for his magnificent translation and for his encouragement in this project. J. R. R. Tolkien is no longer around either, but it is my happy duty to thank the other authors of the critical essays: John Leyerle, Jane Chance, Roberta Frank, Thomas Hill, Fred C. Robinson, and Leslie Webster. Special thanks are also due to my colleague Joseph Harris and to Al David, Rob Fulk, Kevin Kiernan, Bruce Mitchell, and Fred C. Robinson (again) for varying amounts of practical advice, encouragement, material help, and prose; my gratitude also to Carol Bemis, Rolf Bremmer, Chick Chickering, Terry Dolan, Mike Drout, Anthony Adams, Nick Howe, and Jason Puskar for more advice, opinions, and assistance. For two years my students, bless their hearts, have willingly submitted themselves to a range of critical approaches that went into the shaping of this edition.

This book is dedicated to my hearth-companions: Ann, Nathaniel, Kevin, and Hannah.

Old English Language and Poetics

Many students are surprised to learn that English poetry is older than prose—older by many centuries. We are accustomed to think of prose as naturally prior because of our personal experience: being simpler, prose is something we learn to write in the early days of our schooling. Poetry seems more challenging to read, and most of us never learn to compose it. We are also accustomed to think of prose as little more than a transcription of speech. But it is not. Written prose has its own conventions, which did not emerge in English until well after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons around 700 C.E. and the subsequent introduction of the Latin system of writing. For centuries before that time, Germanic tribes all over Europe had fashioned a sophisticated practice of poetry, which was learned and passed on by memory. Several passages in *Beowulf* describe how an Anglo-Saxon *scop* (pronounced “shop”) either improvised a poem or recounted a traditional story in verse, and the presence of an official *scop* in Hrothgar’s court gives an idea of how highly valued they were in society. By the time Latin letters were introduced to England, the Anglo-Saxons were already in possession of a vigorous tradition of oral poetry. The familiarity of the conventions helps explain why, when clerics began to write down poems, they felt little need to indicate where clauses or verse lines ended. Any reader, it seems, would bring that knowledge to the task. To our eyes, the poems are lineated as if they were prose.

The words not only look foreign in the manuscript (written in a script called Anglo-Saxon square minuscule), they also sound strange to the ear. The reason is not simply that the sounds of individual words are different: *Ðæt wæs god cyning* is recognizable as “That was a good king.” And the reason is not found in the use of alliteration or compound words, which are still everyday features of English. The pronunciation, spelling, and word endings of Old English take some time to understand, but even at that stage the syntax and rhythm of *Beowulf* can resist comprehension. Many people find this residue of strangeness intriguing, as if a parallel poetic

world opens up that forces them to reconsider the received wisdom. Generations of admirers (like Longfellow, Tennyson, Auden, and Heaney) have been attracted to *Beowulf's* faintly disorienting strangeness within an otherwise familiar English tradition.

Since about the thirteenth century, the dominant verse pattern in English has been built on the iambic foot, which is immediately recognizable from just a brief example, such as these lines from a Wordsworth poem:

x / x / x / x /
 I wandered lonely as a cloud
 x / x / x / x /
 that floats on high o'er vales and hills.

The syllables are drawn into the iambic rhythm to the extent that even the humble "as" gets carried along by a stress that it would rarely have in normal speech, and "o'er" is reduced to one syllable to keep the count right. The iambic regularity sets up a "prosodic contract" with the reader, so that even if another kind of foot is substituted, the rhythm plays off the underlying expectation of regularly alternating syllables. To those who have become habituated to the iambic rhythm, it can come to seem natural, but it is a highly conventionalized artifice, against which free verse and other metrical innovations of modernism and postmodernism have defined themselves.

The Old English prosodic contract works from equally arbitrary but entirely different principles. It is almost as though the Germanic innovators of this prosody (some time before the fifth century) selected a limited number of phrasings from their ordinary speech and formalized those rhythms as the basic units of the poetic line. Other rhythms were excluded. So rather than elevate a regularly repeating pattern (like the iamb), they pieced together phrasal units from already-familiar rhythms. Two such phrases, called half-lines, combine to form an Old English verse line. In pairing them together a premium is placed on variety, so that the same rhythm is rarely repeated in both halves of the line (thus ruling out an iambic line), and two successive lines are rarely alike. The paired half-lines are linked by alliteration on the stressed syllables, as in the g-sounds of

1 2 3 4
 Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær.

In translating this line Heaney preserves the alliterating pattern in

1 2 3 4
 God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.

Each half-line typically has two primary stresses that qualify for alliteration, which add up to four per line, as numbered above. The con-

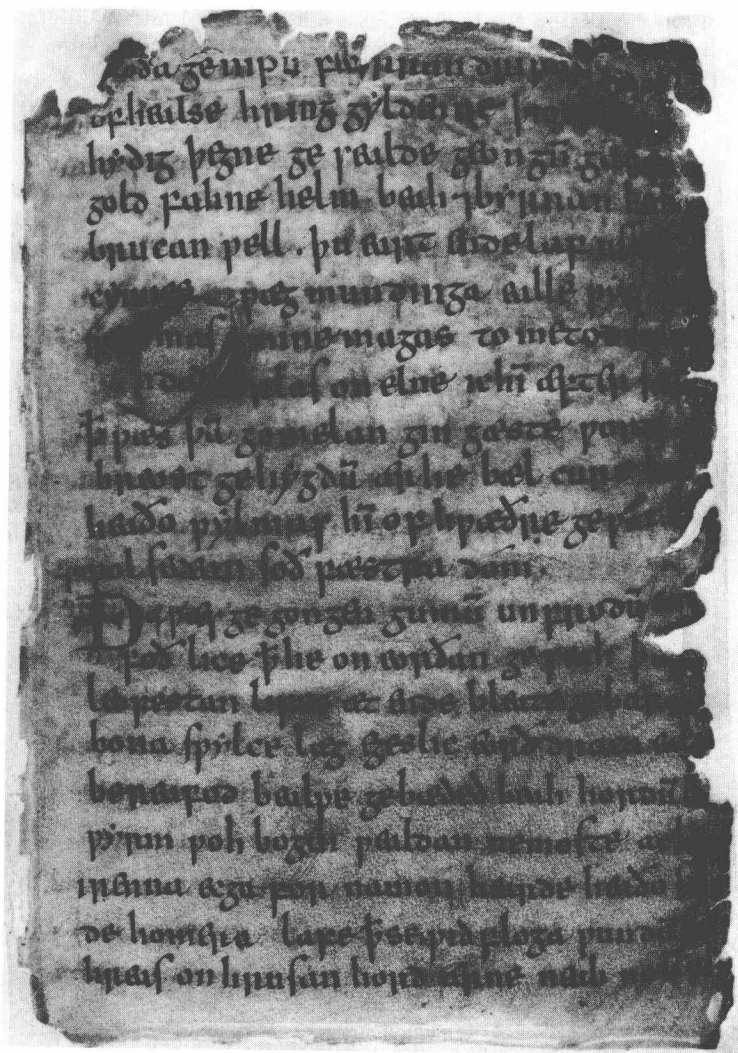


Figure 1. The *Beowulf* Manuscript: Cotton Vitellius A. xv, folio 191r. By permission of the British Library. Note the hole in the top half, which was likely caused by a blemish in the animal's skin from which the vellum was made. Letters from the next folio can be seen through it. The folio's ragged, distorted edge is the result of damage from a fire in 1731.

ventions say that in the first half of the line either 1 and 2 alliterate (as in this line), or just 1 by itself; in the latter half 3 always alliterates and 4 never does. One final source of variety: the alliterating sound is rarely repeated from one line to the next. Thus if one line alliterates on [b], the next line will alliterate on any sound but [b]. Other features that cannot be discussed here, such as syllable length, also come into play. Taken together, the metrical constraints favor an economy of expression within the half-lines so that each syllable is carefully weighed. Compound words, for example, not only create vivid juxtapositions, but their conciseness as a single word (as opposed to a phrase) offers a metrically compact element that is useful in constructing half-lines: "earth-dragon" is shorter than "dragon of the earth," but it has the same number of stressed syllables.

The following passage from *Beowulf* shows the intricate interplay of these features.¹ It is based on a transcription from the folio reproduced here, beginning with the large Ð (a letter known to the Anglo-Saxons as "eth"). For reasons that will become clear later, the gloss given above the lines makes little concession to Modern English syntax:

Then it came about to the man un-aged
 Ða wæs gegongen gumun unfrodum

with difficulty that he on earth saw
 earfoðlice þæt he on eorðan geseah

the most beloved of life at end
 þone leofestan lifes æt ende

2823

wretchedly faring. Killer likewise lay
 bleate gebæran. Bona swylce læg

terrible earthdragon of life bereft
 egeslic eorð-draca ealdre bereafod

by aggression afflicted. Ring-hoards longer
 bealwe gebæded. Beah-hordum leng

2826

dragon coiled to possess was not allowed,
 wrym woh-bogen wealdan ne moste,

1. This passage is given a thematic and rhetorical interpretation in Donoghue, "The Philologist Poet: Seamus Heaney and the Translation of *Beowulf*," pp. 245–46, below.

but him of iron the edges took
ac him irenna ecga fornamon

hard battle-sharp of hammers remnant
hearde heaðo-scear[p]e homera lafe,

2829

so that the wide-flier because of wounds quiet
x x / \ x / x / x
þæt se wid-floga wundum stille

fell to earth the hoard-cave near.
/ x / x / \ x /
hreas on hrusan hord-ærne neah.

2821-31

No pair of half-lines duplicates the rhythm, yet each conforms to one of the established patterns found throughout the poem. Similarly, the alliterating sounds of each line are not repeated in its neighbors. By way of illustration, the last two lines are scanned using the conventional notations for an unstressed syllable [x], full stress [/], and the kind of secondary stress [^] found in the latter half of compounds like *wid-floga*. Taken together, these conventions give each line of Old English verse a precisely modulated but endlessly variable rhythmic and alliterating contour. The very features that the Anglo-Saxons found aesthetically pleasing can make the poetry seem foreign today. Where the iambic line sets up the expectation of regularity, the Old English line insists on rhythmic variety. Where end-rhyme puts the most prominent aural feature at the end of the verse, alliteration creates a dynamic across the middle of the line.

The syntax can seem baffling. The order of words is sometimes called "free," but "free" must not be understood as a kind of linguistic liberty where words can be scattered around without constraint. For the phrase *lifes æt ende* (line 2823) another idiomatic word order might be *æt lifes ende*, which snaps into focus as "at life's end," but as such it would be unmetrical. The line reads *lifes æt ende* not because of some syntactic whim but because the meter requires *lifes*, which takes the alliteration, to precede the unstressed syllable of *æt*. Other half-lines, such as *wealdan ne moste*, are poetic formulas that had a practical usefulness as prefabricated elements in the construction of verse.

Another syntactic feature, called "variation" or "apposition," is also a pervasive rhetorical device. In the sentence beginning on line 2824, for example, two separate nouns refer to the dragon, and they in turn are modified by two separate phrases. By way of illustration, they can be reconfigured to align the parallel elements:

Bona	}	swylce læg	{	ealdre bereafod
egeslic eorð-draca				bealwe gebæded

A literal translation:

the killer	}	likewise lay	{	bereft of life
terrible earthdragon				afflicted by aggression

It is a construction in which separate words have the same referent and the same syntactic function within a clause, but they are placed as parallel elements without any formal linking—not even a conjunction like “and.”² At times the effect of apposition is simply cumulative, so that the additional information supplied by successive words fills out the first reference, such as “the killer, the terrible earthdragon.” On other occasions, however there can be more subtle rhetorical effects. The dead dragon, for example, is “bereft of life, afflicted by aggression,” where the Old English word *bealwe*, means “aggression,” but it also carries connotations of “evil.” One way to read this apposed element then, is to be alert to the clue that the dragon’s death was justified because its violence was evil. This meaning is not explicit, but rather an interpretive possibility available to readers attentive to the connotations of *bealwe*.

One of the rhetorical advantages of apposition is its openedness: the aggression in this case can be both Beowulf’s (with less emphasis on evil) or the dragon’s. The same passage has another set of parallel epithets in “edges of iron” and “the hard, battle-sharp remnants of hammers,” both of which are descriptive phrases for “sword.” In fact, the half-line *homera lafe* “remnants of hammers” is an instance of a highly compressed and enigmatic figure of speech known as a kenning. Kennings are especially characteristic of Old English (and Old Norse), and their spare allusiveness lends itself to the economy of the alliterative line. If one were to expand *homera lafe* into a more prosaic expression, it might be “what remains after the blacksmith’s hammers have finished their work”; that is, “a sword.”

The principle of apposition can be extended in two directions. In the lexicon, the effort to give multiple perspectives and the requirements of alliteration lead to a proliferation of synonyms. Common concepts like “horse,” “hall,” and “man” may have over a dozen variants, a number that does not include the many possible compounds. Some of these words, like *guma* “man” (in the first line of the pas-

2. For a lucid account of apposition, see Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985).

sage), are found only in poetry, and were part of a specialized lexicon which would also include poetic compounds and kennings. In any language, however, true synonyms are very rare, and the Old English synonyms for a word like "man" had connotations which in many (perhaps most) cases are lost to us.

The absence of conjunctions that characterizes apposition leads to the second direction: the syntax of sentences. Old English poetry is sparing in its use of subordinating conjunctions like "although," "while," "because," and "if." The sentences in the passage under discussion are typical: the most adventurous conjunctions are "so that" and "but." But in the same way that apposed elements within a sentence can suggest nuances, the sparing use of conjunctions can induce the reader to make interpretive connections between clauses.

This brief survey has identified a number of areas where the language of *Beowulf* seems to diverge from contemporary English. The most pronounced case might be apposition. Today the repetition of words and phrases with the same referent, even the kind of "elegant variation" once favored by some Victorian writers, is actively discouraged. A student paper that included passages like "the killer, the terrible earth-dragon, deprived of life, afflicted by evil aggression" would be savaged in red ink. In the case of *homera lafe* and the other variations on sword, Heaney restructures the syntax into an epithet followed by descriptive adjectives, "Hard-edged blades, hammered out / and keenly filed," where "hammered out" is itself a kind of remnant (*laf*) of the original kenning. But he does not always rephrase apposition out of existence. By preserving it on occasion, Heaney's translation reminds the reader that another tradition lies behind his text. In addition, there are other areas where the old conventions resist an easy assimilation. Old English favors metrical variety over iambic regularity; alliteration within the line to rhyme at the end; a specialized vocabulary that includes compounds and kennings; and a sparing use of subordinating conjunctions. Within each half-line there is a strict economy of syllables and word order. In units larger than the half-line, however, the clauses have an elasticity that allows them to grow very long. Much of the "feel" of Old English verse results from the tension between the constraint of one and the expansiveness of the other. Just how Seamus Heaney finds the right pitch between the two is described in his "Introduction."

Because the Anglo-Saxons left no *ars poetica*, the principles outlined here are a scholarly reconstruction from some 32,000 lines of Old English verse that survive in written form. Even though there is much still to learn, it is clear that Old English verse was complex. And conversely, Anglo-Saxon audiences were sophisticated in their ability to understand how poets manipulated the conventions. It is wrong to assume that because the material conditions of Anglo-

Saxon society were primitive by today's standards, everything else about it was underdeveloped as well. Such an assumption flies in the face of what we know about many oral cultures, some of which are still active today. Even without an Anglo-Saxon *ars poetica* we know that oral poetry was a primary art form in their culture. After the introduction of writing some poets were able to fuse the oral and literary traditions into profoundly powerful compositions like *Beowulf*.