Beowulf and Other Old English Poems

Translated by Constance B. Hieatt
With an Introduction by A. Kent Hieatt

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Revised and Enlarged Second Edition

BANTAM BOOKS
NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

BEOWULF AND OTHER OLD ENGLISH POEMS
A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY
First edition published by The Odyssey Press / The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967
Bantam Revised Classic edition / January 1983
2nd printing . . . September 1988

Cover art The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial: *Purse Lid, (detail) c. 625-650 A.D. Reproduced by Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum.*

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ISBN 0-553-21347-4

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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BEOWULF

The identity of *Beowulf's* author and the exact date and place of its composition are unknown. A single copy of the poem, dated about the year 1000, survived Henry VIII's destruction of England's monasteries and was collected by Sir Robert Cotton. This copy was damaged, but not disastrously, in a library fire in 1731 and was finally placed in the British Museum in 1753. The Danish scholar Thorkelin had copies made of it in 1787 and published the whole of it for the first time in 1815. Originally untitled, it is named after its hero, Beowulf, and is divided into two parts: In the first part the young Beowulf battles the monster Grendel and Grendel's vengeful mother; in the second, an aged Beowulf kills a fire-breathing dragon but is himself mortally wounded.

No historic Beowulf is known to have existed, but some events described in the poem did take place in the sixth century. Early scholars tried to prove that more than one poet wrote the work, but it is now generally accepted that, like the *Iliad's* Homer, there was one composer of *Beowulf*, who took the stories, legends, and myths of his culture's oral tradition and bound them together with his own artistic vision. Written in England at least fifty years after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, and perhaps much later, the poem is recognized today as the longest and greatest poem extant in Old English—yet it describes an ancient heroic society of Danes and Geats in Scandinavia; there is not one word about England, or about the people who come to be known as the English, in the poem.

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Preface to the Second Edition

This version of *Beowulf* is obviously not intended for an audience of scholars of Old English, for no translation can be a substitute for the original. Nor is it a trot for graduate students struggling to reach that eminence: there are already enough more-or-less literal translations, such as that of E. T. Donaldson, to serve their purposes. My aim has simply been to produce a readable translation for adult readers and students who do not read Old English. A selection of shorter poems has also been included as some indication both of the quality and variety of Old English poetry and of its coherence as a body of literature. While all the shorter poems are quite different from *Beowulf* (and, in most cases, from each other), each has particular similarities, and all together can give a reader an idea of the literary context in which that great poem belongs.

Since readability was a primary objective, I have had to take some liberties in rearranging sentences and rephrasing, although I have tried to be as faithful to the text as possible. Those who use the translation as an aid in understanding the Old English are warned that, for example, what is an adverb in the original may turn up as an adjective in a rearranged structure. I have also discarded a few minor details, especially some that puzzle even specialists, but more of these obscure references remain than in the first edition since they may be felt to add to the amplitude of the felt "background."

Certain of the poetic embellishments (although not as many as in some translations) have also been sacri-

ficed, since this a prose translation. Working in prose cannot really be described as a decision since I never seriously considered verse: it is my conviction that a verse translation may or may not be a good poem, but it is not the *same* poem. The qualities that remain the same in a translation are those of theme and overall structure, and greater verbal accuracy is possible in a prose translation, where a faithful rendering of the meaning (including certain verbal elements that can be seen as structural) is not obscured by the exigencies of a superimposed verse form. The shorter poems are, of course, generally more lyric, and thus lend themselves less easily to prose translation. But even here it still seemed preferable to render their content as clearly as possible without the obscuring effect of an alien (or pseudo-archaic) verse convention.

There are two apparent exceptions: *The Seafarer* is also given in Ezra Pound's brilliant verse translation, or adaptation, and *The Battle of Brunanburh* in Tennyson's rendition. If the reader will compare these poems with the prose translations, he may judge for himself some of the different advantages of prose and verse in translation.

As in the first edition, *Beowulf* has been divided into units approximating the "chapters" to which modern readers are accustomed. These have, however, been slightly rearranged and divided into the numbered divisions actually indicated in the manuscript. These may not seem the "logical" places for narrative divisions to a twentieth-century audience and there is no way of knowing whether they originated with the poet—nor are all the numerals present in the manuscript. However, *Beowulf* is not a twentieth-century narrative, and the division into what are known as "fitts" was, at least, made in Anglo-Saxon times and thus constitutes more-or-less contemporary evidence for the original audience's perception of structure.

In revising—and adding to—these translations, I have aimed at improving their fidelity to the "effect" of Old English poetry, as well as fidelity to the "meaning" of words and constructions translated. I have, therefore, paid careful attention to the impact of verbal patterns, including those suggested by etymology. In the case of the shorter poems, I have made an extra effort to improve the rhythmic effect of the prose: it is still prose, but the effect intended is one with a relationship to the rhythms of Old English verse. Those who know the field will understand if I say that the model is more nearly Ælfric than Caedmon.

Like the translations themselves, the notes were composed with a nonspecialist audience in mind. In general, I have given a note only where it seemed to me that the reader might be confused without it. I hope that the introduction will clear up many questions before they arise: a reader coming to Old English poetry for the first time should certainly be urged to read the introduction first.

I am fortunate in being able to include an introduction by my husband, A. Kent Hieatt, who has had much experience of teaching Old English poems in translation. Like the translations, the introduction has been revised for this new edition. I am grateful to him and to a number of other scholars who have read my work in one form or another for suggestions for its improvement—most of which were accepted. I owe a great debt of gratitude to other scholars and teachers for other reasons, of course, but most of all to John C. Pope. I would have dedicated the book to him if it had not seemed an inadequate offering.

CONSTANCE B. HIEATT

The University of Western Ontario
August 1982

Introduction

All of the poems which are translated in this collection reached the form in which we now have them between the seventh and tenth centuries. They were composed in Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, which was the earliest form of our language, preceding Middle English, which was, for instance, the speech of Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340–1400). The small group of remarkable Old English poems and prose works that survives is the earliest body of literature in any of the vernaculars that have developed into the modern languages of Europe.

Beowulf (summary of story on p. xx), the longest and most important poem here, concerns famous deeds supposedly performed in an age long before that of the poet, among Germanic tribes living near the European homeland from which the Anglo-Saxons, another Germanic folk, had come to England. Most scholars believe that it was composed by a single author in the eighth, ninth, or tenth century. The Christianity of the poet's England was still strongly influenced by pagan habits of thought. *Beowulf* may come from the far north of England—Northumbria—but more probably from Mercia, directly to the south of this.

We should not know of *Beowulf* at all if a single manuscript of it had not survived the expropriation of

the monasteries, with their libraries, by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century, and a disastrous library fire in 1731. This manuscript apparently dates from the tenth century. Charred at the edges by the fire, it continues to deteriorate year by year. An edition of it prepared by the Dane Thorkelin from copies made in 1787 preserved many words which have since disappeared from the original, but this edition was burned in the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. The original transcriptions—one by a professional scribe, the other by Thorkelin—fortunately survived.

The history of *Beowulf*'s physical preservation is, then, something of a cliff-hanger. The poem itself has been systematically studied only during a recent part of its long existence. As a consequence of this study the estimate of this work's significance has undergone mutations almost as sensational as the manuscript's survival of the burning of Robert Cotton's library. It is now almost customary to begin writing about it by condemning earlier commentators. This is possibly as it should be, for *Beowulf* even today is the most drastically misunderstood of all the monuments of English literature. Furthermore, it is so difficult to say what the work really amounts to that it is easiest to begin by smothering in the cradle some easily conceived false ideas that arise from mating it with quite different kinds of poems, or from judging it by literary standards irrelevant to its highly individual kind of life.

One of the most influential essays ever written about *Beowulf* states absolutely that it is a lyric, not a narrative, poem. This is possibly intentional exaggeration, but what J. R. R. Tolkien (see Bibliography) probably meant was that the poem is a tissue of oblique allusions and highly stylized elegiac passages intended to build a particular atmosphere and a particular feeling about life, more than it is a straight narration of a series of events in the life of a hero. This claim is surely

true. *Beowulf* cannot be considered an epic like the *Iliad.* Moreover, in spite of its calamitous ending this poem is not a "tragedy" in the sense in which the *Iliad* or Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* or *Hamlet* is a tragedy, or in the sense in which Aristotle said tragedies ought to function. For a probable majority of specialists its hero has no specific tragic flaw precipitating his downfall; his only flaw is the most general one that he belongs to humankind and is subject to our common fate. On the other hand *Beowulf* is not simply a myth or a piece of folklore, for it is a product of sophisticated literary calculation. And it is not an allegory of good and evil, as so much medieval literature is, for the warfare that forms its background is not an *abstract* illustration of ethical problems; some of this strife is certainly historical, and much more may be.

One reason that *Beowulf* is difficult to describe as a piece of literature is that it had no successors and that nothing like it survives. It is true, of course, that the very local Germanic language in which it was written has gone on from strength to strength until in its modern forms it is the most important language in the world; but the great body of partly heathen, partly Christian Germanic poetry and prose to which *Beowulf* belongs became a closed system long ago.

The Germanic peoples of the Dark Ages had a shared tradition of oral composition stretching from Austria and Northern France north and west to Scandinavia and Iceland. If we consider this body of works in terms of what was written down and survived, we may say that it begins with Old English literature (seventh–eleventh centuries), continues in the material of the Icelandic Edda and sagas (eleventh–thirteenth centuries) and in some less important German and Scandinavian material, and closes with the Austro-German *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1204). Efforts to revive this literature or imitate it have been interesting in them-

selves but have missed its true quality. The Germanic dragon slayer Sigemund of *Beowulf,* for instance, some of whose attributes are those of the Sigurd of the Icelandic *Volsungasaga,* and of the Sifrit of the *Nibelungenlied,* is apparently revived in the Siegfried of Wagnerian opera, but Wagner's Siegfried and Brunhilde share the effect of some early Germanic literature only at a kind of mythical, preliterary level. The development of the narrative and stylistic traditions of later English and all other poetry and fiction really lies outside the influence of this Germanic literature. Even the Old English alliterative verse forms scarcely survived after the century of Chaucer, the fourteenth, when they came back briefly into surviving writings in the highly altered form of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and some other poems in the north and west of England. That was nearly the end, except, perhaps, for the point that English poetry alliterates more to this day than poetry does in most other languages.

Even within the total body of early Germanic literature, *Beowulf* stands by itself in many important respects. Icelandic saga, for instance, is severely objective in its narrative: authorial comment and point of view are so muted that the modern reader is likely to lose his bearings. *Beowulf,* on the other hand, is commentary through and through, in several senses. Sometimes the commentary is very sly, in the sense that one section of the story inconspicuously contrasts with or parallels another, or that an interpolated story or allusion has some kind of many-layered reference to the main action. At other times the commentary is very straightforward, as when the character King Hrothgar makes ethical pronouncements worthy of another Dane, Polonius, or when the author himself is performing one of his bracing exercises in differentiating the sheep from the goats. (He consigns nicors, dragons, ungenerous kinglets, cruel queens, Cain-descended beings, and cowardly

retainers to darkness, mist, slime, fens, caves, and perdition with a heart-warming gusto and rhetorical amplitude; the rest of us, on the other hand, are made to seem sons of light. The author's aims are really far from being simpleminded, but he is against evil with the muscular conviction of a muckraking newspaper.)

Here, certainly, the objectivity of Icelandic saga furnishes no parallel, either to *Beowulf* or to most of the rest of Old English poetry, which almost always shares in this militant glorification of good over evil; some Old English poems, in fact, wallow rhetorically in this contrast. But even if we narrow the focus from Germanic literature in general to Old English literature in particular, the rest of this highly interesting Old English poetry is of only a little help in understanding what is literarily most important about *Beowulf*.

What other Old English poetry most obviously shares with *Beowulf* is a system of versification. In this system, end rhyme almost never appears. Unless a line is defective, it has four beats or, technically, "lifts"; the line itself consists of two "verses," between which there may or may not be a pause; and the sound at the beginning of the syllable carrying the third lift also appears at (i.e., alliterates with) the beginning of the first lift, or of the second lift, or of both of them, but never at the beginning of the fourth lift (alliterating lifts are italicized here):

Swa b*egnorn*odon *Geata* leode
1 2 3 4

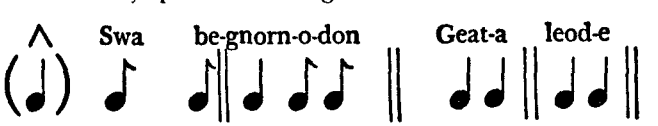
*hla*fordes *hry*re, *heorth*-geneatas;
1 2 3 4

cwædon thæt he *wæ*re *wy*ruld-cyninga,
1 2 3 4

*man*na *mild*ust ond *mon*-thwærust,
1 2 3 4

*leod*um *lith*ost ond *lof*-geornost.
1 2 3 4

In the feet (iambs, trochees, anapests, dactyls) of most poems likely to be familiar to the reader, the number of unaccented syllables is theoretically constant, but in Old English poetry the number of unaccented syllables between the lifts typically varies. In the final five lines of *Beowulf*, which are quoted above, there is no syllable at all between the last two lifts in the last two lines. This kind of verse was traditionally recited aloud, not read silently. A widely accepted theory suggests that the note of a harp was used to substitute for spoken syllables at some points in the pattern. For instance, in the first line above, such a note (indicated below by a rest substituting for a musical quarter note) probably supplied the first lift. According to the most popular theory today,[1] each quarter of a line with its lift was heard as a measure in 2/4 musical time, here indicated by quarter and eighth notes:



Aside from versification, certain shared stylistic traits (discussed below) make *Beowulf* and all other Old English poems sound superficially rather alike. Nevertheless, *Beowulf* remains significantly different. *Widsith* only alludes to some of the characters in *Beowulf* and their deeds. The only other complete poem in Old English that deals with the deeds of Germanic heroes is *Deor*,

[1]That of John C. Pope, most simply explained in *Seven Old English Poems*, edited by him (New York: W. W. Norton, 2nd ed., 1981).

but this is a short lyric. It is a notable statement of the transitory nature of earthly life, but it is not, as *Beowulf* is, a long narrative *about* these deeds. *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are similarly short, wonderfully evocative lyrics, among the best and most famous in Old English, but they are not at all concerned with traditional Germanic heroes. The deeds of such heroes are related in other Germanic languages of the Middle Ages, but, as was indicated, the poems or prose works in which these relations appear are so different from *Beowulf* that they do not much help our understanding of the poem as a work of art. On the other hand, the Old English *Maldon* and *Brunanburh* are outstanding narrative poems, like *Beowulf,* but they are much shorter, and each of them is about one battle within the immediate historical range of the poet, not about some semimythical past. *Waldere* and *Finnsburh* do enter that past, but are merely tantalizing fragments of lost longer poems. Other Old English poems are built on far different material borrowed from outside the Germanic world. The Old Testament is drawn on and adapted in the poems *Genesis, Exodus,* and *Daniel,* and in *Judith,* a very powerful fragment. Caedmon was inspired to compose a Creation-hymn that is similar to the one reported in *Beowulf.* (The story is that Caedmon thought poorly of his own poetic abilities. When he attended a feast at which each guest was expected to chant a poem, he retired to a shed. There an angel told him to compose this poem on the spot, which he did.) Saints' lives from the Mediterranean world appear in *Andreas, Elene,* and *Juliana,* and the allegorized story of a non-Germanic miraculous bird in *The Phoenix.* Besides other material from the New Testament, the story and significance of Christ's crucifixion is fervently rendered in *The Dream of the Rood,* perhaps the most remarkable of Old English devotional poems.

Great as these poems are, none of them really

comes near what many students of the subject now recognize as the essential artistry of *Beowulf*, although there is one interesting qualification here: all these poems, whatever the subject, make use of some of the heroic habits of thought which *Beowulf* shares. For instance, the Cross, imagined as speaking in *The Dream of the Rood*, describes a Christ who is active and warriorlike in his crucifixion, which sounds like a battle:

> The young Hero—who was God almighty—stripped off his attire; strong and resolute, he mounted the high gallows, brave in the sight of many when he wished to free mankind. I trembled when the Warrior embraced me. . . . They drove through me with dark nails; the wounds are still visible, open signs of malice.

Christ's followers conduct his death rites as though they were Germanic warriors:

> There they took almighty God, lifting him from the heavy torment. . . . They laid the weary Warrior down and stood by the head of his body. There they watched the Lord of Heaven, and he rested there for a while, exhausted by the great ordeal. They began to make a sepulcher for him—warriors still within view of his bane—carving it out of bright stone, and in that they set the Ruler of triumphs. When they were ready to depart, exhausted, from the glorious Lord, they raised a song of sorrow, wretched in the evening-time: he rested there, with little company.
>
> We still stood there, weeping in that place for a long time. The voices of the warriors faded away. The body grew cold, fair dwelling of the soul.

It is only in two strictly speaking nonliterary respects that most Germanic narratives—Old English, Icelandic saga, the *Nibelungenlied*—share something impor-

tant with *Beowulf*. A reader needs to know about these points in order to understand *Beowulf* itself. The first of these is the frequent similarity of narrative motifs—much the same heroes, much the same incidents—often appearing in widely separated times and places. The Germanic peoples seem to have inherited a common body of narrative, which is a key to understanding the often incomplete and puzzling allusions and interpolated stories forming a large part of *Beowulf*. The other feature that *Beowulf* shares with other Germanic narratives is an emphasis upon the ethical principle of loyalty to another—to friend, family, chieftain, tribe, or the company of all faithful Christians (one of the clearest illustrations of this principle is *Maldon*). The breaking of this bond through cowardice or treachery is considered singularly abominable; and personally executed revenge—no matter how long delayed, no matter how sanguinary—against the ones who harm one's associates is held to be obligatory for every man, unless he is to be shamed publicly and even to hate himself. A typical tragedy of the Icelandic sagas is that of the good and farseeing man who will not stir for small causes, even when his wife taunts him and his sons press weapons into his hands, but who, knowing he will sooner or later be murdered in turn, will kill coldly and kill again when this vengeful necessity of his manhood and fame is finally thrust upon him by the folly of others. In the same way, the pathos of the *Nibelungenlied* lies in the working out of a devious pattern of mutual vengeance through hecatombs of frightful slaughter. The author himself sees that loyalty so understood is self-defeating, but he shows us no alternative. The Old English poems adapting Old Testament materials often center around much the same idea of vengeance: for example, the heroine of *Judith* cuts Holofernes' throat as a revenge for the Israelites, Satan revenges himself on God by