

BEOWULF

A VERSE TRANSLATION



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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Beowulf

[Prologue: The Rise of the Danes]

So. The Spear-Danes¹ in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson,² scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes. 5
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road³ had to yield to him 10
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterward a boy-child was born to Shield,
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent
by God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,⁴
the long times and troubles they'd come through 15
without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
And a young prince must be prudent like that, 20
giving freely while his father lives
so that afterward in age when fighting starts
steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behavior that's admired
is the path to power among people everywhere. 25

1. The Danes are identified by a variety of names, all referring to the same tribe: Spear-Danes, East-Danes, Victory-Shieldings, etc. See "The Kingdoms and Tribes of *Beowulf*," p. 96, below.
2. The poem up to line 52 recounts the story of Shield, who arrived as a "foundling to start with," but as an adult established the Danish royal family. For the pronunciation of Old English names, see the glossary, pp. 248–50, below; for the legend of Shield, see pp. 93–94, below.
3. "Whale-road" is a literal translation of the Old English *hron-rad*, an example of a compressed figure of speech known as a kenning. Other kennings for "ocean" are "swan's road" (line 200) and "gannet's bath" (line 1861).
4. Suffered, endured [*Translator's note*]. Heaney takes advantage of the fact that the Old English *þolian*, while long obsolete in Standard English, survived in the Ulster dialect of his parents. See the "Translator's Introduction," p. xxxv, above.

Shield was still thriving when his time came
 and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
 His warrior band did what he bade them
 when he laid down the law among the Danes:
 they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
 the chief they revered who had long ruled them. 30
 A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbor,
 ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
 They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
 laid out by the mast, amidships,
 the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures 35
 were piled upon him, and precious gear.
 I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
 with battle-tackle, bladed weapons
 and coats of mail. The massed treasure 40
 was loaded on top of him: it would travel far
 on out into the ocean's sway.

They decked his body no less bountifully
 with offerings than those first ones did
 who cast him away when he was a child 45
 and launched him alone out over the waves.
 And they set a gold standard up
 high above his head and let him drift
 to wind and tide, bewailing him
 and mourning their loss. No man can tell, 50
 no wise man in hall or weathered veteran
 knows for certain who salvaged that load.

Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.
 He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
 for a long time after his father took leave 55
 of his life on earth. And then his heir,
 the great Halfdane,⁵ held sway
 for as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
 He was four times a father, this fighter prince:
 one by one they entered the world, 60
 Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga,
 and a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's queen,
 a balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.

The fortunes of war favored Hrothgar.
 Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks, 65
 young followers, a force that grew
 to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
 to hall-building: he handed down orders
 for men to work on a great mead-hall

5. According to an early source, Halfdane's mother was Swedish.

meant to be a wonder of the world forever; 70
 it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
 his God-given goods to young and old—
 but not the common land or people's lives.⁶
 Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
 orders for work to adorn that wallstead 75
 were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there
 finished and ready, in full view,
 the hall of halls. Heorot was the name⁷
 he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
 Nor did he renege, but doled out rings 80
 and torques at the table. The hall towered,
 its gables wide and high and awaiting
 a barbarous burning.⁸ That doom abided,
 but in time it would come: the killer instinct
 unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant. 85

[Heorot Is Attacked]

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
 nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
 to hear the din of the loud banquet
 every day in the hall, the harp being struck
 and the clear song of a skilled poet 90
 telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
 how the Almighty had made the earth
 a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
 in His splendor He set the sun and the moon
 to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men, 95
 and filled the broad lap of the world
 with branches and leaves; and quickened life
 in every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there
 until finally one, a fiend out of hell, 100
 began to work his evil in the world.
 Grendel was the name of this grim demon
 haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
 and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time

6. Even a powerful king could not dispose of land used in common or unlawfully kill his subjects.

7. Heorot means "hart" or "stag," a symbol of royalty.

8. An allusion to the future destruction of the hall as a result of a feud between the Danes and the Heatho-Bards. Upon his arrival back among the Geats, Beowulf brings the news that Hrothgar plans to give his daughter Freawaru in marriage to Ingeld, the Heatho-Bard king, to settle the feud (lines 2020–69). He predicts, however, that hostilities will flare up again, leading (by implication) to the burning of Heorot.

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A VERSE TRANSLATION

Praise for Seamus Heaney's new translation:

"Accomplish[es] what before now had seemed impossible: a faithful rendering that is simultaneously an original and gripping poem in its own right."
—*New York Times Book Review*

"The translation itself rides boldly through the reefs of scholarship. . . . *Beowulf*, an elegy for heroism and a critique of feud and fratricide, is alive and well."
—*The Observer*

Winner of the Whitbread Prize, Seamus Heaney's poetic translation of the great epic poem *Beowulf* is the basis for this new Norton Critical Edition. The text is accompanied by detailed explanatory annotations and an introduction to Old English language and prosody. In addition, Heaney's clear and insightful introduction to *Beowulf* provides students with an understanding of both the poem's history in the canon and Heaney's own translation process.

A rich selection of materials on Anglo-Saxon and early northern civilization provides undergraduate readers with *Beowulf's* cultural and historic context. Included are relevant excerpts from Genesis, *The Exeter Book*, the Icelandic saga "Grettir the Strong and the Trollwoman," and the Old English "Frisian Slaughter." Also here are excerpts from works by Alcuin, Gregory of Tours, and William of Malmesbury. An extensive collection of illustrations—thirty-six in all—along with genealogies and a list of kingdom and tribal names, is included. In addition, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson write on the *Beowulf* manuscript, and R. D. Fulk and Joseph Harris discuss *Beowulf's* name.

Critical interpretations are offered by J. R. R. Tolkien, John Leyerle, Jane Chance, Roberta Frank, Fred C. Robinson, Thomas D. Hill, Leslie Webster, and Daniel Donoghue. These essays have been chosen for their relevance to undergraduate readers. Donoghue's essay includes a full discussion of Heaney's engagement with the *Beowulfian* conventions throughout his poetic career.

A Glossary of Personal Names and a Selected Bibliography, including the Web address for Heaney's reading of six hundred lines from his translation on BBC audio, are also provided.

ABOUT THE SERIES: Each Norton Critical Edition includes an authoritative text, contextual and source materials, and a wide range of interpretations—from contemporary perspectives to the most current critical theory—as well as a bibliography and, in most cases, a chronology of the author's life and work.

COVER ILLUSTRATION: The Cuerdale hoard. Found at Cuerdale, Lancashire, England, this hoard was buried about 905 C.E. and is the largest Viking silver hoard found in north-western Europe. © Copyright The British Museum.

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