

Beowulf— A Poem

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Andrew Scheil

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I dedicate this book with love and affection to a very important person in my life: my aunt, Mary Ann Satter. A beloved high school English teacher (Brighton High School; Rochester, NY) with a long career (now retired), Mary Ann is and always has been a kindred soul as a devoted reader, feeding me books from my earliest age. In writing this, I was thinking of her voice in conversation and our shared love of reading.

Introduction

Now, perhaps more than ever, I read to find solace and meaning. And so, in the search for some shelter from “the wrackful siege of battering days,” I submit *Beowulf*. My purpose here is simple: I want you to love *Beowulf*. I want you to find it as moving and significant as I do. For those who have not read the poem, this small book will serve as an invitation and introduction. For those who have read the poem, but found little of interest, this is a plea to reconsider. For those who already know and love the poem, I hope this short study will further deepen that pleasure.

Why should you bother to read *Beowulf*? This is not a flip-pant question. Life is brief and there are far too many good books to read in a lifetime, not to mention other pressing pleasures and responsibilities. What can reading *Beowulf* possibly offer? My answer: you should read *Beowulf* because it is a deeply humanist work; that is, *Beowulf* is a work of art that searches out, and attempts to address, the most fundamental question: what does it mean to be human—medieval or modern—in this world around us? If reading is to be more than simple diversion, then for what other reason *should* we read, if not to be inspired and transformed and to test our sense of life’s capacities? *Beowulf* needs to be championed as a moving literary experience; we need to understand (or be reminded) why Seamus Heaney called the poem a “work of the greatest imaginative vitality,” a “work of art [that] lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of real-

ity in the present time," a poem with an honoured "place in world art."¹

Beowulf has been one of my companions for a long time. I'm quite sure my first introduction to it was sometime in the mid-1970s, when I was about ten years old, in the short but potent adaptation for children by Anne Terry White in *The Golden Treasury of Myths and Legends* (enhanced by the wonderful illustrations of Alice and Martin Provensen).² I first read and studied the full poem (in Michael Swanton's translation) in school when I was sixteen. Since then, I have read it for personal pleasure and taught it to a wide variety of students, in translation and in the original language, for over thirty years. I cannot, in fact, ever remember *not* having read or known *Beowulf* or having it as a part of my deeper self; Emerson's comment on his connection to Montaigne's *Essays* describes something of my own feelings about the poem: "It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience."³

However, I certainly understand that mine is perhaps not the typical experience. Like so many great works, *Beowulf's* appeal can be difficult, but we should not be hasty to dismiss difficult experiences, especially of books. We can be too quick to press the "like/dislike" button. In a well-known passage, Lionel Trilling turns this kind of judgement upside-down:

1 Seamus Heaney, "Translator's Introduction," in *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, ed. Daniel Donoghue, 2nd ed. Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2019), xxiii-xxxix at xxiii and xxv. Hereafter abbreviated as "NCE."

2 *The Golden Treasury of Myths and Legends*, adapted by Anne Terry White, illustrations by Alice and Martin Provensen (New York: Golden, 1959).

3 "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," in *The Annotated Emerson*, ed. David Mikics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 326-47 at 334.

... a real book reads us. I have been read by Eliot's poems and by *Ulysses* and by *Remembrance of Things Past* and by *The Castle* for a good many years now, since early youth. Some of these books at first rejected me; I bored them. But as I grew older and they knew me better, they came to have more sympathy with me and to understand my hidden meanings. Their nature is such that our relationship has been very intimate.⁴

How refreshing I always find that passage! When we engage with a book, the experience is not one-way—not just the reader evaluating and judging the book. Rather, we interface with that entity we call “*Beowulf*,” or “*King Lear*,” or “*Pride and Prejudice*,” and those books read us, as much as we read them. I do not feel I've ever been rejected by *Beowulf*, but it has taken decades of effort to more fully unlock the poem, to make myself the kind of reader worthy of the book. I hope these chapters will hasten that process for readers willing to make themselves open and vulnerable to that experience.

Therefore, I think of this book as a personal and appreciative literary introduction to *Beowulf*. This is not an introduction to the culture and history of early medieval England or to the broader literary culture of the period. I will stick very closely just to *Beowulf* in these pages and not head off into other works, which are likely to be unknown to the reader. This is also not an introduction to the scholarly study of *Beowulf*: there will not be typical discussion of the manuscript context, dating the poem, style and language, historical contexts, Christianity and paganism. There are many such scholarly introductions, whether in print or online; so no need to repeat them here.⁵ Also, while such subjects have

4 Lionel Trilling, “On the Modern Element in Modern Literature,” *Partisan Review* (1961): 9–35 at 15. The Trilling quotation is paraphrased and cited by Mark Edmondson in his wonderful book, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 46, essential reading for anyone who loves and teaches literature.

5 Three key works that can propel anyone into the deeper scholarly study of the poem are the following: R. D. Fulk, Robert E.

inherent interest, they say little or nothing about the poem as an abiding literary experience. It is easy to cloud this crucial matter with background information and scholarly debates, and yet never confront the more pressing issue right in the foreground: why bother to read it? I believe the reading of literature should be a transformative endeavour, and I believe *Beowulf* is as subtle, affecting, and moving as any great work of world literature.

“Beowulf, Monster-Slayer”

Many readers at this point might say “well, I already know *Beowulf* and I like/don’t like it.” But chances are, no matter your impression (positive or negative), what you are calling “*Beowulf*”—the entity you carry in your head—bears only an oblique relationship to the actual Old English poem. Far more people know “the story of *Beowulf*” without having read the poem. And that is wonderful! The vibrant academic field of reception history has taught us that some works can break free of their inceptive historical contexts of time and place to then circulate as “world literature”: in translation, adaptation, revision, parody.⁶ These endless adaptations are not “debasements” of a more worthy pristine “original.” As Chris Jones shows in a fine essay on *Beowulf* adaptations, even the one manuscript copy of the poem we have is itself a derivation from a prior version, and from a prior version before that, and then back into the distant prior world of pre-literate art. There is no one “original” and “authentic” *Beowulf* and then a host of false adaptations;

Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds. *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds. *A Beowulf Handbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003).

6 This definition of “world literature” is from David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). On adaptations, see Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

we have rather an endless circulation of infinite variety, each of these iterations potentially worthy of study and enjoyment.⁷

But one effect of this process is that the circulated “public image” of *Beowulf* is invariably a partial rendering of the extant medieval work. While powerfully generative of new adaptations, this cultural meme we call “*Beowulf*” is inevitably a reduction of the medieval poem. Almost without exception, every adapted form of *Beowulf* concentrates mostly on the monster-fights only. Therefore, *Beowulf* becomes “Beowulf, Monster-Slayer” and little else. Even when the medieval text is taught in the classroom, it is generally the case that the limited time spent on the poem is directed mostly to the monster fights and a rather simplistic view of heroism; much of the poem’s complexity does not conform easily to classroom instructional time.

The public image has therefore generally eclipsed the medieval text: “Beowulf, Monster-Slayer” is much better known (and consequently hated or beloved) than *Beowulf*, the Old English narrative poem from the early Middle Ages. What is lost in that simplification? What I would call the humanist dimension of the poem. We lose, for example, the all-important narrator, whose presence considerably deepens the complex humane effect of the work. We also lose all the allusive, dark, complex material of the “digressions.” Stripped of all this, when someone says they know *Beowulf*, this tends to be the “*Beowulf*” they know—“Beowulf, Monster-Slayer.” The monsters are important, and J. R. R. Tolkien definitively changed the course of our understanding of the poem in his celebrated 1936 essay on the monsters.⁸ But in my view, the

7 Chris Jones, “From Heorot to Hollywood: *Beowulf* in its Third Millennium,” in *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination*, ed. David Clark and Nicholas Perkins (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), 13–29. One can include in this sense the recent creative feminist reimagining of the poem by Maria Dahvana Headley in *The Mere Wife* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020) and in *Beowulf: A New Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).

8 J. R. R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” (1936);

monsters are only a gateway to the more rewarding and complex human concerns of this stately work.

My goal therefore is to introduce you to a great and strange work of verbal art from a vanished world. Let's try to suspend thoughts of "Beowulf, Monster-Slayer" and try to read the poem without preconceptions. If it helps, in order to de-familiarize the poem and see it anew, pretend, as long as you can, that its title is anything but "*Beowulf*"; scholars only gave it that title in the nineteenth century anyway. Call it *Song of the Ancient North* or *Deeds of Light and Darkness* or anything else that might stir your imagination.

Scholars, Critics, and the Love of Beowulf

So the phenomenon of "Beowulf, Monster-Slayer" in the popular consciousness probably helps explain why the reading of the poem (in translation) can be a disappointing experience for most—if you are expecting "Beowulf, Monster-Slayer," then when you get to the actual poem, there are a lot more lines devoted to speeches and confusing exposition than there are to monsters and action. But what have the professional scholars, critics, and teachers been doing with this poem? They are the ones who are supposed to mediate it to the broader public. The record, unfortunately, is mixed. The critical history of *Beowulf* is quite odd. Unlike Chaucer and Shakespeare, for example, whose works had their literary champions during their own lives and immediately after their death, and then found that reputation enhanced by several hundred years of scholarship and criticism and popular readership, *Beowulf* was unknown to posterity for a very long time. *Beowulf* had no real critical reception until the nineteenth century. This is not the place for a full critical history of *Beowulf* scholarship, but the first thing to note is that there was (and continues to be) a long tradition of scholars who read and study and value the

repr. in NCE, 111–38. On the monsters see Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

poem, but mainly for non-literary reasons: *Beowulf* is very important to historians; to linguistic specialists; to scholars of manuscripts and oral-formulaic poetry; to archaeologists, and more.⁹ And this too, is a wonderful thing! The achievements of scholars in these disciplines and their work on *Beowulf* over the past few hundred years is inspiring: may it ever continue. But it has meant that quite a bit of work on the poem in these demanding disciplines does not, understandably, attend much to the poem as a literary experience for a more casual reader.

Even to begin to understand the technical subjects of *Beowulf* scholarship requires long, noble specialist training. For all these scholars, their primary reason to study the poem is often to illuminate other, non-literary, concerns. Questions of literary worth become secondary or invisible. And then, by extension, quite often “to teach” *Beowulf* is to teach descriptively *about it* and to teach *about its contexts* and its scholarly issues; not so much to re-create its literary effect in an act of critical empathy and understanding. We should be able to treat *Beowulf* like any other great work of literary art that reads *us* as we read it, without retreating into contextual information to avoid such an encounter. It is understandable to want to have power over a text, to explain its ambiguities, and solve its puzzles. We want to impose our will on a work, rather than letting it work its will upon us, opening up to it, letting its vitality operate inside us. But such an open perspective requires humility and vulnerability. We should allow a text to challenge and change us. And so, occasionally, we must step back from *Beowulf*’s endlessly compelling scholarly puzzles, and ask “What is this work’s vision of human experience? What questions does it pose, how does it present them, and how does it answer them, if at all?” And then to ask: “Given the poem’s total complex vision of humanity and the world, can you, reader, use it? What happens when you measure your own

⁹ See T. A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder, eds. *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1998).

view of the world and your own inner self against the poem's experience?"¹⁰

There have been scores of talented *Beowulf* scholars who have illuminated its many enigmas. But, by my reckoning, there has been a much thinner line of academic critics who have read the poem with the sensitivity and nuance that I long for (at least in print—the classroom may be a different matter). The first among them is Tolkien. As is well known in the field, Tolkien's polemic essay established *Beowulf* as a complex work of literature; as Bruce Mitchell (perhaps over-optimistically) noted long ago, since Tolkien's lecture, the work "is now viewed more as a poem and rather less as a museum for the antiquarian, a sourcebook for the historian, or a gymnasium for the philologist."¹¹ Tolkien's essay is justly celebrated, but it is also true that it probably has had an oversized influence on the poem's understanding. My debt to the essay (and the critical tradition it initiated) is apparent throughout this book, but I try to walk around this influence, so to speak, conscious that one is always in its shadow. At all times, I write with the conviction, so energetically advocated recently by Rita Felski, that literary criticism at the present moment needs to bring out all the positive encounters with literature: inspiration, invention, solace, recognition and identification, reparation, passion, consolation, empathy and sympathy, creation and enchantment, the "eros of love and connection."¹²

To sum up: lots of views out there on "Beowulf, Monster-Slayer"; many superbly talented specialist scholars of the poem; relatively few excellent literary critics of *Beowulf*. So I write this little book to exalt a work of art that I feel has very few effective literary advocates at the moment; there

10 Cf. Edmondson, *Why Read?*, 56.

11 "'Until the Dragon Comes ...': Some Thoughts on *Beowulf*" (1963); repr. in Bruce Mitchell, *On Old English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 3–15 at 3.

12 *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 17, *passim*.

is a lot of accomplished technical scholarship in print, also some quite bad attempts at criticism, but not much to make you love the poem, or explain why you might find the reading experience moving and worthwhile. My goal is to gather up the best that I think has been thought and said about the poem as a literary experience, and supplement that with my own thoughts. In the end, I write this not only for the reader who wants to appreciate *Beowulf*, but I write this also especially for the unnamed *Beowulf*-poet, who laboured hard and long over these words, who cared enough to bring a complex creative vision into being. I want to conjure up a loving vision of what the experience of the poem is like, a critical re-creation that the poet would perhaps find satisfying.

The Humanist *Beowulf*

What do I mean when I call *Beowulf* a “humanist” work of art? What do I mean by “humanism” in this regard? I am obviously not using the term in a historically specific way: this is not a book about a Renaissance or Enlightenment reception of *Beowulf*. Rather, I find a congruence between the values and perspectives of modern humanism (which of course has its historical roots and transhistorical character) and the literary endeavours and effects of our poem.¹³ To unpack this assertion in greater detail is the task of the following pages, but here are the main emphases; *Beowulf* is a humanist work because:

- it is interested in and engaged by the lives of real human beings in the here-and-now of this terrestrial world (i.e., it is not a visionary work like Dante’s travels to the afterlife, or the exotic travelled-to spaces of romance);
- it is interested in and engaged by human ways of knowing, human understanding, human beliefs and customs;

13 For introductions to humanism in this sense see Tony Davies, *Humanism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008) and Stephen Law, *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

- it is interested in and engaged by the conduct of human life, human ethics and morality, at both the individual and collective (or social) levels;
- it is interested in and engaged by the varied ways individual human lives are embedded in and conditioned by social institutions and history;
- it is interested in and engaged by existential and metaphysical concerns (e.g., the afterlife), to the extent that these relate to lived human experience;
- as the poem, in its length, mediates upon the above subjects, it displays at all times a complex (sometimes conflicted), searching curiosity and intelligence.

In this list, I mean “interested in and engaged by” to stand for a variety of ways the poem treats these subjects. Questions, doubts, meditations, assertions, contradictions, gnomic proclamations, hortatory injunctions, argumentation: the poem uses all these and more to explore the enigmas of the human story. *Beowulf* does not, in its totality, present one clear, univocal argument about anything (humanist or otherwise). At all times, it presents a vivid exploration of the human experience: from birth to death, lingering on each moment for itself, each moment of human engagement fully regarded, deeply felt and apprehended.

In order to make my case that anyone can and should read *Beowulf*, I use Seamus Heaney’s acclaimed poetic translation for all citations, and only occasionally discuss a few lines or words in Old English.¹⁴ At the moment, Heaney’s translation is probably the most widely known and read English translation

14 All references will be by lines numbers of the translation in the Heaney *Beowulf* Norton Critical Edition (“NCE”); the Heaney translation has been reprinted in a wide variety of formats: as the NCE; as a stand-alone volume; with facing-page Old English; in a wonderfully illustrated volume (ed. Niles); in the many editions of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. If I cite any Old English, it is from Klaeber.

of *Beowulf*. The translation is also a work of modern poetic art in its own right by an important modern poet, and if one of the purposes of this book is to get more people to read and appreciate *Beowulf*, then I believe the Heaney translation conveys a compelling but accessible, aesthetic power.¹⁵

In other words, another argument here is that the poem does not necessarily need to be read in the original language to find it deeply provoking and satisfying. *Beowulf*'s humanist art transcends the translation process. Of course, the poem is certainly *even more* startling and powerful in the original language, and each time I teach it to students in Old English, I am reminded of this and my appreciation grows deeper every year. But an argument for the excellence of the poem in Old English would proceed in a very different way. The sad fact is that only a vanishingly tiny percentage of people will ever read the poem in Old English; I want to make my case to the larger audience who might read it in translation.

Each of the following four chapters makes the case for a humanist *Beowulf*. Although the chapters do build on each other in sequence, I have fashioned them also to be stand-alone studies, the better to be read or used in various ways. Annotation is kept to a very bare minimum, in keeping with the Past Imperfect series. Chapter 1 is about doubt, an essential ingredient in any humanist enterprise. Chapter 2 is about the poem's interest in the contingency of human events. The poem's atmosphere of doubt and its complicated perception of contingency leads to the tragic mode, the subject of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 argues that a powerful counterpoint to the tragic mode of the poem is its delight in art, making, and the cunning of form: the eloquent poem, the beautiful ship, the intricately wrought sword and cup. Set against the darkness of the poem is the bright delight in human skill and its infinite faculties.

15 For an analysis of Heaney's translation as poetry, the best places to start are his illuminating "Translator's Introduction" in NCE, xxiii-xxxix and Daniel Donoghue's "The Philologer Poet: Seamus Heaney and the Translation of *Beowulf*," in NCE, 230-41.

Beowulf is, in many ways, unique. While it is thoroughly traditional and of its age, it is also *sui generis* and a highly original, even experimental work of verbal art.¹⁶ The poem's survival from the past, and its current world-wide ubiquity—the capacity now to find a translation easily, and read it, and to fall into the poet's imagined world—is nothing less than miraculous.

***Beowulf*: A Summary**

I provide here, as a preliminary to our literary conversation, a compact summary of some basic scholarly facts and questions about *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* is the modern title given to a long anonymous and untitled narrative poem of 3182 lines written in the earliest form of the English language ("Old English"). The poem exists in only one manuscript copy made around the year 1000, somewhere in England. This surviving copy derives from an antecedent copy (and probably more than one), in a transmission process going back some number of centuries. The poem was composed in England, but exactly who wrote it; when, where, and how it originated; how many copies or versions stood between any "original" and our surviving early eleventh-century copy are all subjects of scholarly debate.

The entire poem (the work of one poet) is a legendary/semi-historical fiction set not in medieval England, but in various more ancient locations in Scandinavia and northern Europe. It is clear that the poem uses ancient techniques of poetry, storytelling, and subject matter; it is part of what

16 I am not alone in this assessment; e.g., commenting on the narrative structure of the poem, Michael Lapidge notes that in terms of *Beowulf*'s narrative devices "there is no satisfactory model in antecedent western literature"; and "[o]ne could even say that no medieval poem—in Latin or in the vernacular—composed before c. 1100 bears any resemblance to *Beowulf* either in its structure or in its narrative discourse" ("*Beowulf* and Perception" (2001) in NCE, 242-68 at 256, 260).

must have once been a large body of vernacular Germanic poetic storytelling across the North Sea region, now mostly vanished, but with enough surviving in later medieval versions in various languages for us to understand much about this literature. The narrative of *Beowulf* is set in the period just prior to the Middle Ages: the pre-literate, pre-Christian north of the fifth and early sixth centuries. Characters and events in the poem range from the historical to semi-historical/legendary to fantastical.

The evolution of the poem seems to have begun with a core body of legendary material originating in Denmark connected to a great sixth-century hall complex at Lejre on Sjælland (the island on which Copenhagen stands). This body of legendary material appears to have had two main subjects: first, the travails of the Scylding (Old Norse *Skjöldungar*) line of Danish kings; and second, the haunting of their hall by a monster. The monster-haunting very soon was assimilated to a folktale motif: the so-called “two-troll” narrative, in which a hero defeats two successive monstrous attackers of a settlement.

This complex of legendary/folktale material then migrated to England. When? Either relatively early (late seventh or early eighth century), or somewhat later (after the mid-ninth century). Once in England, other details, sub-plots, and digressions accrued to the original body of material: e.g., the dragon fight, the name “Grendel,” the characters’ Scandinavian names were Anglicized, the Breca swimming contest, and so forth. When, or in what order these elements were added, and by how many stages, we do not know. Most of these details were probably added to the main story-complex when it circulated in oral transmission (perhaps in poetic form, perhaps not), but we cannot be sure.

And then, at some English time and place (seventh-century East Anglia or Northumbria?, eighth-century Mercia?, the ninth-century Danelaw?), someone conceived of a project to compose and set down in writing a long Old English poem capturing all this material, in traditional oral-poetic style

and subject matter, using the figure of a central hero named “Beowulf” to write a sophisticated poem that foregrounded the stories of this hero’s killing of the two troll-like monsters in his youth, and his death as a king in old age while slaying a dragon, with briefer reference to other exploits among his people, the Geats.

But the poet augmented this central story matter in at least two important ways: first, by embedding these monster-slaying moments in Beowulf’s life within a complex body of other allusive tales and legends scattered throughout the main narrative—other stories: told, partially told, or simply referred to throughout the work; and, second, by providing a complex narrator to preside over the poem and comment regularly upon the action: a distinct voice with traits deriving both from the secular poetic tradition and from the early medieval Christian world-view. *Beowulf* is a complex and rich poetic enterprise generated in early Christian medieval England, but looks back to its pre-Christian past; it is a retrospective poetic fiction, not a barbaric pagan story simply “brushed up” and transmitted by pious Christian monks.

And this poet—deeply skilled in the composition of Old English poetry in a traditional style rooted ultimately in pre-literate oral art—somehow saw this grand-scale endeavour committed to parchment. Why and how was this done? Who (or what institution) precipitated this project? Was it a literate Christian poet, who was nevertheless also well-skilled in traditional secular verse? If so, how did this person come by these skills and how did he operate? (Most likely the poet was a “he,” but is there any possibility it was a “she”?) Could the project have been a collaboration between a non-literate, skilled oral poet and others who were able to set it down into writing and burnish it? Or was it something else? Such questions, once again, are the subject of scholarly disagreement. Once composed and set down in writing, the work then began its long journey (how many centuries and intervening copies, we do not know) to the final extant latter-day copy from the early eleventh century. What hap-

pened along the way? Was the poem altered, augmented, or rewritten? In small or large ways? All fascinating scholarly questions, but our subject here: is it worth reading?¹⁷

17 My summary of this probable evolution of *Beowulf* from its origins in Denmark to our single manuscript copy of the poem, follows in general the arguments of John D. Niles in "On the Danish Origins of the *Beowulf* Story," in *Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent*, ed. Hans Sauer and Joanna Story, with Gaby Waxenberger (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 41-62, summary of the evolution at 56-61; see also see the related materials and essays assembled by Niles in *Beowulf and Lejre* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007).