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Beowulf: The New Translation



BEOWULF

THE NEW TRANSLATION

GERALD J. DAVIS



Synopsis

J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, in his famous 1936 lecture, "Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics", said, "Beowulf is among my most valued sources. It is a work of genius, rare and surprising in the period, and it is worth studying. In Beowulf we have an historical story about the pagan past. Beowulf is not an actual picture of historic Denmark or Geatland or Sweden about 500 A.D. But it is, on a general view, a self-consistent picture, a construction bearing clearly the marks of design and thought. Beowulf is, indeed, the most successful old english heroic elegy." The origins, history and authorship of Beowulf are shrouded in uncertainty. This heroic epic probably began, as most do, with a wandering troubadour strumming a stringed instrument, sitting before a hearth-fire, and singing the verses to a spellbound audience arrayed before him. At some point, the words of the troubadour were inscribed in manuscript form, in order to preserve the story for posterity. The events depicted in this story take place during the late fifth to early sixth century. However, there is great dispute among scholars as to when the manuscript itself was actually transcribed. Tolkien believed it was written about the eighth century, while other serious experts assert it was written as late as the early 11th century. Beowulf is a rousing adventure story, filled with intrepid heroes, monsters and fire-breathing dragons, which can be listened to for the sheer enjoyment of the tale.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a masterful translation of a fantastic story. I last read Beowulf 15 years ago and it was a

pleasure to read it again. I appreciated Davis' notes at the back of the book as they put the poem in a true historical context and demonstrated the scholarly effort that went into the writing. It was a fun reading.

I only knew the story from the movie before. Sad this didn't have Angelina Jolie in it but it was ok

Very readable, you wish it was longer.

This puts to shame the Seamus Ennis translation, which of course got off on the wrong foot by rendering the epic introductory, "Hwaet!" - a trumpet-blast of an opener if there ever was one - as the laconic Irish farm laborers' "So," and took a long time to recover from that faux pas, no matter how argued in Seamus' notes. Ah well. Gerald Davis knows Old English, for a start, and follows both letter and tone in this fine work. No translation is ever perfect, by definition: "Tradditor il traddutori," necessarily (no translator has ever adequately grappled with Chaucer's "hende" - in both senses - Nicholas and "Prively he caught [Alysoun] by the queynte," in that delightfully bawdy "Miller's Tale," despite the easy "semantic slide" from the Middle English to the Modern English descendant of "quenyte," which one still may not put on the page without horrified deletion by bowdlerizers aplenty. Oh well). But, like Gerald Davis' version of Cervantes' "Don Quixote," this will stand by itself for some time to come. Parallel translations, now - there's an interesting pedagogic device, perhaps to be followed up later by Gerald Davis. I've probably missed his already.

Just wasn't my type of reading

Mr. Davis acknowledges somewhere that this is not quite a translation, but an adaptation of the earliest prose translation and the earliest verse translation (both made in the early 19th Century). It is a readable version in poetic prose which is as fine as any other I have read or tried to read. Here is a sample: Then, when night was come, Grendel went forth unto the great hall to see how the warriors betook themselves to rest after their reveling was done. And, therein, he found them, this band of noblemen, reposing after the feast, thinking not on sorrow or misfortune or the misery of man. Whereupon, Grendel tarried but little. This monster of damnation, grim and greedy, savage and strong, seized thirty thanes from their slumbers and slew them. From thence he hastened unto his lair, laden with the carcasses of the slaughtered, exulting in his prey. And here is the lake where Grendel's mother lives: it is not farther from hence than the distance of a mile where the lake stands.

Over it, the frost-bound boughs hang, firmly rooted in the black soil, casting bleak shadows over the water. There, each night, appears a fearsome sight—“a fire upon the flood. There lives not, among the sons of men, one so wise who can fathom the bottom thereof. Nay, even the great-antlered stag, driven fleeing from afar, harried by hounds, would rather yield up his life upon the bank than plunge into its waters. That is not a good place. Thence ascends a surge of shadowy waves unto the clouds when the winds bestir evil storms, till the air is defiled and Heaven weeps.” I almost deducted a star reading the tedious afterword, which I thought were the self-published lucubrations of Gerald Davis, only to reach the very end and read this: From the preceding enquiries, it appears to me that I have gained the following results: first, I have vindicated the legends for Anglia, and, next, I have assigned their proper place to the Angle legends, among the traditions of the Teutons. The pointing out the mythological relations of the names which occur in our genealogies may perhaps also be looked upon as an object justifying the pains and space devoted to it. If it does nothing else, it at least shows the principle upon which we must proceed if we wish to have anything like a clear view of what these genealogies meant to convey. Trinity College Cambridge Cambridge, England 1835 Oh, well, that’s all right then. No points off.

As translated, the story is compelling and ironic. However, it also raises many more questions than it answers, which is of course, a good thing. Thank God for the Internet and Wikipedia, that’s where many questions are answered. But many more are not. I wish that some of the historical, geographic, and demographic milieu of the tale could be covered in an appendix of the book.

Compared to the original version, which I never finished, this is readable—thank you Mr Davis. The story is timeless and should be required reading for our high school students.

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