

BEOWULF

A New Verse Translation

Trans. by Seamus Heaney

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Written more than a thousand years ago in the Germanic tongue from which the pre-Norman core of modern English is formed, *Beowulf* is the epic poem of the warrior hero who survived a succession of fierce trials only to languish in the entombing clutches of university scholars. This sacred text of the Old English canon, the bane, or at least the emetic, of English Literature students for generations, has been dusted off and revived by Irish poet Seamus Heaney, a name familiar to many American readers. Educated at a Catholic school in Ulster, he knows first-hand what it feels like to participate in competing historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions simultaneously, as did the ancient author of the epic who, a millennium ago, straddled the narrowing gulf between paganism and Christianity in northern Europe. Heaney, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, began this labor of love in the mid-1980s. He draws upon his own considerable skill as a poet and his love of the *sound* of language to effect this brilliant translation which, despite his predilection for “weighty distinctness,” verges on melody. Overall, he has a tendency to avoid Old English’s appositional syntax and prefers that a line make sense rather than adhere strictly to alliterative conventions. For the modern reader, these are improvements over earlier translations.

Mr. Heaney does a most creditable job of stripping off the layers of venerable varnish and letting the classic tale resound in the “big voiced” style of its mortal heroes.