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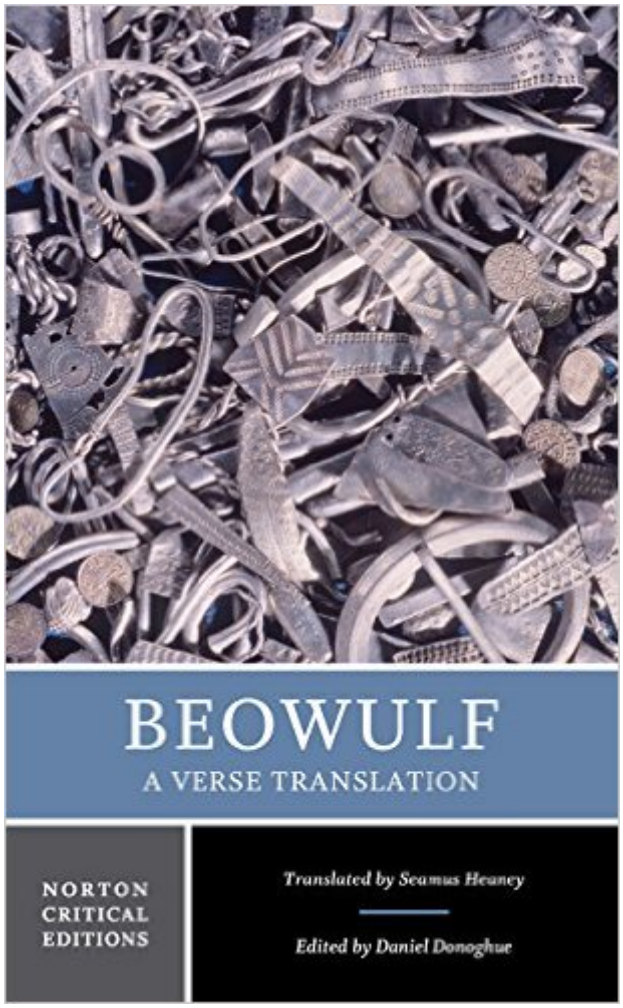
Beowulf: A Verse Translation (Norton Critical Editions)



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Synopsis

Winner of the Whitbread Prize, Seamus Heaneyâ ™s translation "accomplishes 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 that "rides boldly through the reefs of scholarship" (The Observer) is combined with first-rate annotation. No reading knowledge of Old English is assumed. Heaneyâ ™s clear and insightful introduction to Beowulf provides students with an understanding of both the poemâ ™s history in the canon and Heaneyâ ™s own translation process.

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Customer Reviews

Most people probably think Beowulf is still read merely because it’s old. Well, it is old. Wow it’s old. Hoary and whiskery old. Best estimates place the composition somewhere between the 7th and 10th centuries A.D. One can speak in terms of millenia when speaking of Beowulf. Though it’s old - have I mentioned that it’s old - age is definitely not the sole, or even the best, reason for reading the poem. Flinging oneself into Beowulf is almost like flinging oneself into another language (if one wants to argue that Old English may as well be another language, then there you go). Simply speaking, Beowulf is still read because it is a poetic masterpiece. It’s not read because the monsters go "boo" or because it’s considered the prequel to "The Lord of The Rings"; it’s read for the impact of its language and the themes that it explores. Of course the poem can be read for

enjoyment on the level of an adventure tale. There are monsters, and they're scary, gruesome, and mean; there are also swords, gore, carnage, death, heroes, more swords, myth, partying, a vengeful mother monster, a fire-breathing dragon, and more swords. The Beowulf poet wove a good tale. Some parts spew drama. When Beowulf seeks out Grendel's mother to kill her in vengeance for terrorizing the town, he must submerge himself in a pool of horrid things, holding his breath for the best part of a day. When he finds her his ancient sword fails him. A claustrophobic scene ensues that hydrophobes should skip. Nonetheless, a cursory surface reading obscures the rich interwoven text and meanings that peek just under the surface of what seems to be - to a modern reader, at least - a heroic adventure tale. Just what the poem is about remains somewhat controversial.

I am a dissenter from the hype surrounding Seamus Heaney's new translation. I prefer Donaldson for two important reasons: the transparency of the translation and the translator's humble willingness to let stand archaic implications that may seem absurb or offensive to most people today.On a technical level, Donaldson--much more consistently than Heaney--reproduces Old English compounded words and phrases with Modern equivalents. He does this with accuracy and freshness--if not with seamless grace as some readers would prefer. The great advantage of Donaldson's approach is that the reader who does not read OE can at least imagine that she can second-guess the translator, and can feel the raw, rugged texture of the original. Even my 12th grade (inner city high school) students who have bought Heaney's version have become irate at a number of crucial points where the complexity preserved by Donaldson has been eliminated by Heaney.A second point--or a second way of looking at the same point--concerns interpretation. With all due respect to Heaney, he has an agenda related to the future of the European Union, and I suspect that this motivated or influenced his approach to the translation of Beowulf. Heaney is presenting, via the seminal text of Beowulf, a vision of the origins of European politcs that he believes will ultimately lay a foundation for its future viability and humanity.Heaney's version is this a much more creative endeavor than was Donaldson's. Where Donaldson allows seeming incoherencies to emerge for the modern reader, Heaney makes things make sense. The main difference here lies in the treatment of the hero. For Heaney, Beowulf is an unambiguous ideal figure.

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