

# BEOWULF





# BEOBWULF



A New Verse Rendering by  
Douglas Wilson

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Douglas Wilson, *Beowulf*  
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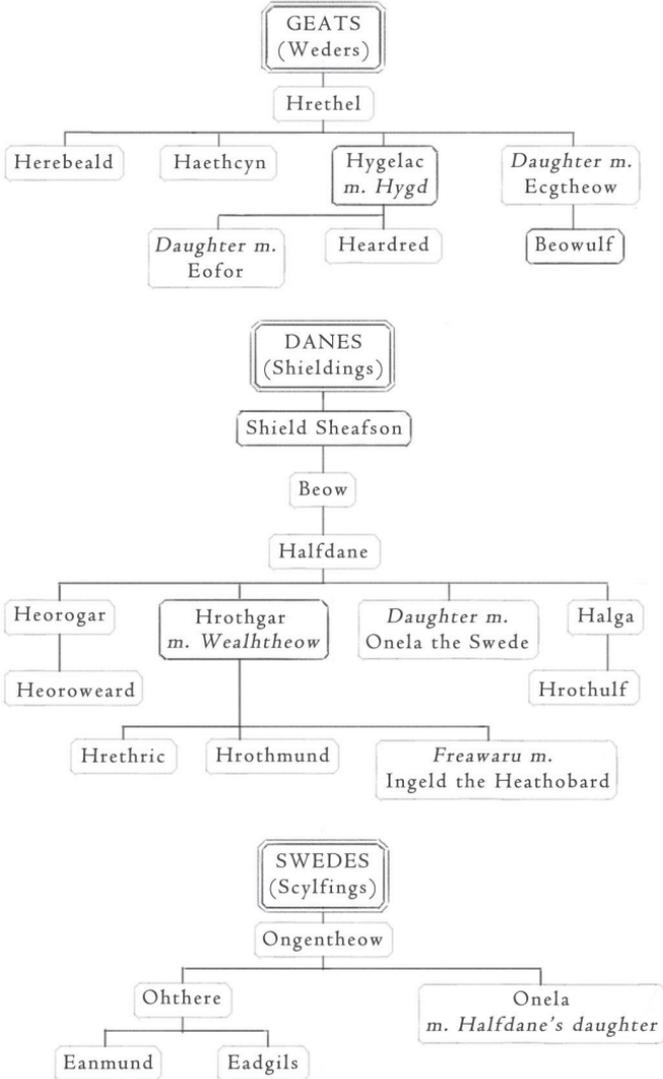
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This book is for Bekah, a blessed dedication.

## FAMILY TREES



The World of  
BEOWULF





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# INTRODUCTION



*Beowulf* has long been an attachment of mine, and this book is really a culmination of that attachment, a genuine labor of love. I can still remember the moment in high school when I saw someone's copy of Raffel's translation. I don't remember when I read it first, and I don't know how many times I have read it since, but I know that the poem handsomely repays return visits. Measured by C.S. Lewis's criterion in *An Experiment in Criticism*, which is that good books should be revisited often, this poem is in my top ten.

One of the things I must do right at the beginning, I suppose, is explain what I mean by saying that this edition of the poem is a "rendering" and not a translation. I know enough Anglo-Saxon to be a hazard, but not enough to set up shop as a translator of anything so important as *Beowulf*. I know the words *attecop*, which means spider, and *rimcraft*, which means arithmetic, and *mersmealuwe*, which means marshmallow. But unfortunately, none of those words comes up in *Beowulf* really, and so there I am, just sitting there. So a suitable humility for someone of my limited means in Old English means that publishing a proper translation of *Beowulf* is out. I never want to get a phone call from Seamus Heaney inquiring into just who exactly it is I think I am. Who wants to be *that* guy?

So what is a rendering, and why is it any better? While I am limited in Old English, I do okay in New English, and know my way around, both with the regular stuff and in the reading and writing of poetry. So what I

did was this. I took about five different translations of *Beowulf*, including my two favorites (Heaney and Chickering),<sup>1</sup> got the sense of lines x, y, and/or z from them, and then cast that general sense into my own modern form of an Anglo-Saxon-style alliterative poetry. Then I did the same thing over again, and went on and on until I was done. Since I was making free to add words for the sake of the alliteration, and because I sometimes supplied my own imagery, the result is a loose paraphrase of the sense of the original and not a knock-off of any of the translations I used. At the same time, the poem can generally be followed “line by line,” give or take a couple of lines, and I am not saying I *never* looked at the original. What with one thing and another, this version of the poem has three more lines than respectable editions do. I don’t know. It was dark. They were big. Just think of it as more *Beowulf* than you would get with those other editions. But the sense of the original is there.

It would be as though someone decided to take five different modern translations of the book of Job and use them as the basis for rendering the whole thing into an epic poem of rhymed couplets. I am not saying that this would be a good idea, but it gives you the general idea of the process that went on here. When you were done, it would kind of hard to identify any of the translations though (hopefully) it wouldn’t be hard to identify the fact that it was supposed to be the book of Job.

For example, for line 11, I have,

Gold came, and glory . . . a *good* king that was!

Heaney has,

and began to pay tribute. That was one good king.

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1. Here’s a list of all five: Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). Howell D. Chickering, *Beowulf* (New York: Doubleday, 1977). Ruth P. M. Lehmann, *Beowulf: An Imitative Translation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988). Burton Raffel, *Beowulf* (New York: Mentor Books, 1963). J. Lesslie Hall, *Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1892).

Chickering translated it this way:

pay him tribute. He was a good king!

The form of poetry I put it into requires some explanation as well. The original poem is made up of lines that are each called a *stich*, and which are broken up into two *hemistiches*. The first stressed syllable in the second hemistich needs to alliterate with the two stressed syllables in the first hemistich. A good example can be found in line 5.

*Monegum mægþum meodo-setla ofteab*

The two *m*'s in the first hemistich alliterate with the first *m* in the second half of the line, which set the alliterative standard. As it happens, according to our forebears, any stressed syllable beginning with a vowel counts as alliterating with any other vowel. My father, one of my copy readers, described this as “cheating,” but I am sticking to my guns. It may be cheating, but it is an ancient form of cheating, hoary with age. This is the general form I tried to follow so that the reader of modern English would have some sense, not only of the content of *Beowulf*, but also of the kind of texture it had.

Now strictly speaking, this means that each line should have only four stresses, and this is where I fudged a bit. And as much as I would like to believe this was rule-guided behavior, I did this part mostly by ear. In stressed-timed languages (which both Old English and Modern English are) we naturally speed up and slow down as we speak in order to make our words fit within the time allotted. In order for this to work, the extra stresses either have to be muted or placed well. My lines are sometimes a tad longer than a purist would allow, with extra stresses, but they can be said in a way similar to what happens when you say the *monegum mægþum* bit given above.

Here is an example of me being strict with myself:

Took a maul to the mead-benches, mangled his enemies (5)

And as it happens, that is my rendering of the *monegum mægþum* line.

And here I am being not so strict. The first syllable of *memory* is also stressed, but it can be read as a subordinate stress and (so I think) it all works out.

His thanes thanked his memory, and thought a sea burial (28)

There were other places where I cheated by not having the alliterative word fall on a stress at all—but as Ovid taught us long ago, *Ars est celare artem*. It is art to conceal the places where you jiggered it a little bit. I also made the *g* in Geat (Beowulf's tribe) alliterate with a hard *g*, and not with the way they likely would have said it back then. So if you read this poem aloud, you will need to say *Geet* and not *Ye-ah!* So sue me.

Some editions of *Beowulf* have a space between the two halves of each line (it is called a *caesura*). We decided against that as a visual distraction, and because the alliteration should make it possible to identify the two halves of the line without the space. The reader may stumble over some lines when they are read silently, but if they are read aloud (as the poem was originally intended to be read), the internal logic of these rhythms will become apparent, at least most of the time. Another reason for such variations from the norm is that strict adherence to the form could result in something entirely too sing-songy, which in an epic could become an affliction around the two thousandth line. Keep in mind also that the alliteration may come in the middle of a word. To make up an example here, *returning in triumph* alliterates.

Another staple of Anglo-Saxon poetry is called the *kenning*, which can best be understood as a compressed metaphor. Some of the original kennings are found here along with some new ones that I contributed. For example, the ocean was called *bron-rade*, or whale-road. The human body was *banbus*—bone-house. The sun was the world-candle, and so on. I wanted the reader to have that particular experience in reading the poem as well.

The poem was originally broken up into sections called *fitts*. I renumbered the *fitts* for reasons that are explained in the second essay, and I entitled them to make the chiasitic structure of the poem clearer.

The point in doing all this was to give the modern student a general experience of the storyline while at the same time providing a very close approximation of the experience of Anglo-Saxon. Whether that happens or not is out of my hands now, but one still hopes.

DOUGLAS WILSON



# BEOWULF



## FIRST FITT † *Funeral of Shield*

Hear the song of spear-Danes from sunken years,  
Kings had courage then, the kings of all tribes,  
We have heard their heroics, we hold them in memory.  
Shield Sheafson was one, scourge of all tribes,  
Took a maul to the mead-benches, mangled his enemies.  
He rose and in rising, he wrecked all his foes.  
A foundling at first, he flourished in might,  
A torrent of terror, war tested his mettle.  
So he bested and broached the borders of nations;  
The whale-road was wide but his warriors still crossed it.  
Gold came, and glory . . . a *good* king that was!  
So Shield had a son, sent as a gift,  
A cub for the courtyard, a comfort from God  
For the nation had known long gnawing of troubles,  
Great trials and tempests, long times of deep suffering.  
They were left leaderless so the Lord of all Life,  
The great glory-Ruler, gave them a chieftain.  
Shield's son he was, and summoned for glory.  
Beow was brilliant, a banner of northernness,  
The pride of great princes, the pride of his family.

10

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So warriors in warfare must be wise in that way  
As ring-givers rise they reach their companions  
So later in life they won't be left on the field.  
His thanes will stand thick with him, there battle is joined.  
Such generous gifts are good for deep loyalty.  
Shield was still strong when summoned in time,  
This Dane-king departed to death—the Lord's keeping.  
His thanes thanked his memory, and thought a sea burial  
Would keep the command their king had passed on to them.  
30 To the shore of the sea they shouldered the burden,  
Committing the king who had covered his people.  
Silent, sheathed in ice, the ship rode the harbor,  
The ring-prow was ready, and rigged for the journey.  
They laid out their lord, beloved by all of them,  
Amidships the mast, they remembered and placed  
Treasures and tackle and trust most of all,  
Battle gear, blades edged, and bright gold and silver.  
Prestige presided there, piled honor on deck,  
I never had known a north ship so fitted—  
40 The weight of that wealth, and the warriors whose tribute,  
Would sail with this ship with it sent far away,  
Their purpose presented to the power of the flood.  
They decked out his death and dealt with him bountifully,  
No little gifts, no less than left in his infancy,  
When set adrift on the sea, a sent-out waif,  
They left him lonely, lost but for destiny.  
They set high the standard, a standard of gold  
High toward heaven, with hearts full of grief,  
The ship they let slide, to sea it departed.  
50 With minds full of mourning, no man here can say,  
No wise one, no warrior, no wizened hall bard,  
Can see or can say who will salvage that treasure.

SECOND FITT † *Hrothgar rises, Grendel stirs*

So Beow then built some battle-strong towers,  
Admired and esteemed, an able Dane king,  
Through long life and rule when left by his father  
To *his* rule and reign and his right to the throne.  
Then his heir, the great Halfdane held sway in his turn  
As long as he lived, their lord and their elder.  
He was father to four, this fighter and chieftain.  
One after another they entered this world, 60  
First Heorogar, then Hrothgar, then Halga the good;  
Then came a queen, future queen for Onela,  
A balm for the bed of that battling Swede.  
Then Hrothgar held firm, held victory in battle,  
Friends flocked to him, foes fled from him,  
And mighty his men grew, a masterful army!  
So a command came from him, the king thought to build  
A royal hall, rising in fame, erected by guildsmen,  
With gables and glory and greatness forever,  
A mead-hall, a marvel, for men to speak of forever. 70  
There his throne would be, and thriving with gifts,  
He would give out those gifts, all God had bestowed—  
Kingly gifts, but no common lands, or cruel giving of souls.  
This hall, I have heard, was a haven for craftsmen.  
Through middle-earth, men were summoned, making way to the building.  
Soon it stood, magnificent, and soon glory rose.  
Finally finished, in full view it stood,  
The hall of Heorot, as he spoke the name,  
The worthy king had willed it, whose word was law.  
So he kept his kingly word and came with rings, 80  
Treasures, and torques, the tables were heaped,  
The hall reared up high, with horn-gabled corners,  
Baiting the battle-flames; that burning would come.

Hatred for Hrothgar was held in abeyance  
But a son-in-law soon would bring samples of rage.  
Now a demon demented, in darkness a prowler,  
Held a hard grudge when he heard with great pain  
The great and the good with glory were feasting,  
The scop<sup>2</sup> sang their songs, and the strings were well played,  
90 The harp filled the hall, a herald of joy.  
So skilled in his singing, he sang the creation,  
The Almighty had ordered the earth to be fashioned,  
Shining, the single plain surrounded with waters.  
He summoned the splendor of sun and of moon,  
Lifting as lamps their lights for *earthwaru*.<sup>3</sup>  
He filled all the fields with fruit for the tasting,  
He gave us such greenery, good leaves and branches,  
And made man and beast that all move in His quickening.  
The place was full peaceful, and pleasant for men  
100 Till finally a fiend, fresh out of Hell,  
Began to give grief with ghoulish, wild haunting.  
This grim monster was Grendel, gifted with terror,  
Haunting marches and moors, marauder of villages,  
Malicious and miserable, in marshes he lived  
For some time with the terrors, the type who were banished  
By the Creator, as kinsmen of Cain, who had blood on his hands.  
The Eternal Almighty had everlasting vengeance for Abel.  
Cain had gotten no good from his grasping in envy  
For the Lord of all life from the light drove the kin-slayer  
110 And he went far from all friendship, into fens of dark exile.  
He was the father of phantoms, and far from the living,  
Begetting ogres and elves and evil black ghouls,  
Giants defying just Heaven, the Judge of all mortals,  
Until the time came for the Titans' great judgment.

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2. A scop is a court singer/poet.

3. A back coinage from *helwaru*, meaning inhabitant of Hell.