

BRIT. LIT.
VOLUME I

OLD ENGLISH

Versification by

DOUGLAS WILSON

BEOWULF

Selected and Edited by

REBEKAH MERKLE



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BEOWULF

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READING SCHEDULE

This Old English segment should take you a grand total of fifteen days, including the test. Here's the official schedule:

DAY 1:	Reading 1 in this volume	13
DAY 2:	Reading 2 in this volume <i>The Hobbit: Chapter 1</i> <i>Poetry Workbook: Lesson 1</i>	23
DAY 3:	Reading 3 in this volume <i>The Hobbit: Chapters 2-3</i> <i>Poetry Workbook: Lesson 2</i>	37
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DAY 9:	Reading 9 in this volume <i>The Hobbit: Chapters 9-10</i> <i>Poetry Workbook: Lesson 8</i>	113

DAY 10:	Reading 10 in this volume <i>The Hobbit</i> : Chapters 11-12 <i>Poetry Workbook</i> : Lesson 9	125
DAY 11:	Reading 11 in this volume <i>The Hobbit</i> : Chapters 13-14 <i>Poetry Workbook</i> : Lesson 10	137
DAY 12:	Reading 12 in this volume <i>The Hobbit</i> : Chapters 15-17 <i>Poetry Workbook</i> : Lesson 11	147
DAY 13:	Reading 13 in this volume <i>The Hobbit</i> : Chapters 18-19	161
DAY 14:	Review all of your questions in this book. Review all poetic terminology from <i>Poetry Workbook</i> .	
DAY 15:	Take test	

WHAT'S ALL THIS THEN?

So you're about to launch a year long campaign into the literature and lore of Merry Old England. To be perfectly honest, I think it'll be a lot of fun, and we've tried to make this as user-friendly as possible. Here's how it works.

Every book is broken down into daily readings, and if you stick with reading your allotted portion every day then everything will be splendid. At the end of each day's reading you will find some questions. They're designed to make you think a bit, and may possibly require you to stretch your brain in uncomfortable ways. Answer them as best you can (in a notebook of some sort would be ideal) and then once you've done so, compare your answers with the answers in the back of the book. Hang on to those answers. You'll need them to study for tests.

On most days, after you've gotten your head around those answers, you will turn to your *Poetry Workbook* and do the designated daily lesson. (Check the official schedule which will tell you which days you need to do this.) Then you're done for the day, and the only thing left for you to do is breathlessly count the minutes until you get to do it again upon the morrow.

This volume, as you may or may not have noticed, is the Old English portion of the series, and you are going to be reading the Anglo Saxon poem *Beowulf* alongside J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. "For what possible reason?" I can hear you asking yourself. I'm so glad you brought this up. The reason you'll be reading these two books in tandem is this. Tolkien was not merely an author of fantasy adventure novels. That was just his hobby. The way he actually made his living was as a professor of Anglo Saxon at Oxford University. This of course means that he was one of the top experts in the world on Anglo Saxon literature, and his deep love of the subject very heavily influenced his own writings. So as you read *The Hobbit*, you should be paying attention to all the little details along the way where you can see that Tolkien is

using the *Beowulf* story to add color, texture, or plot points to his own story. Try to resist the urge to barrel ahead and read the entire *Hobbit* in one gulp before you even finish the first chunk of *Beowulf*. Reading it at the same time is actually a really interesting experiment, so do your best to give it a whirl. And if you've read *The Hobbit* thirty-six times already . . . well, read it again.

A quick note on the *Poetry Workbook*. I'll just go ahead and level with you right now. You're going to write a lot of poetry this year and you're going to memorize a lot of poetry. If that gives you a fit of the vapors, go ahead and breath into a paper bag and then come back. The good news is, I'm sure you'll be awesome at it.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Before we go galloping off into the wild world of *Beowulf*, there are a few things to get sorted out first. For instance, what do we mean by Anglo-Saxon? Who is *Beowulf* and why does he matter? If this is British Lit, why are we reading a story set in Scandinavia? Let's just get a few of those details ironed out before proceeding, shall we?

First, there's this whole question of what "Anglo-Saxon" means. If you grew up on Robin Hood, then you probably know about the tension between the Saxons and Normans. And if you're really hot on your European history then you'll know all about the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Invasion in 1066. But in order to understand who the Saxons were and how they ended up in England in the first place, you'll have to rewind for a moment to quite a bit earlier in the story.

Julius Caesar and his Roman troops made it to Britain in 55 BC as he was first expanding and establishing the Roman Empire. The natives of Britain at the time were a Celtic people known as Britons. After a number of invasions, the Romans had fairly effectively conquered the Britons and gradually civilized a goodish chunk of the island. Some of the natives remained unruly, and the Roman solution was basically to shove them out

to the edges and keep them there. The center of the island, though, they settled and civilized.

Many of the Britons became Romanized and adapted themselves to the new way of life, and as the gospel was first being spread throughout the empire, it found its way to Britain as well. But right around the 400 AD mark, as I'm sure you know, the Roman Empire was beginning to get shaky. They began pulling the troops home from all the far-flung corners of the empire to attend to their problems at home, and the troops occupying Britain just basically up and left. This left all of those Romanized Britons in a terrible predicament. They had been protected by the Roman troops for centuries, but had never been taught how to defend or rule themselves. With their Roman protectors out of the picture, they were essentially sitting ducks. All the hostile (and untamable) tribes from the edges and corners of the island seized the moment and began making their way back in. The civilized Britons in the center desperately wrote to Rome for help but after a couple spurts of assistance, Rome officially cut all ties and told them they were on their own.

Meanwhile, across the North Sea, Scandinavia was full up with marauding Norsemen of the Viking variety. The Britons needed help defending themselves, and since Rome refused to give it, they hired themselves some Scandinavian mercenaries. Now you can see the obvious problem with this plan, and I can see the obvious problem with this plan, but the Britons were desperate. Of course the inevitable occurred. The mercenaries noticed what a lovely island Britain was, and how badly defended it was. They decided to go ahead and take it over themselves. There were three tribes in particular who targeted the helpless Britain: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. They were pagans who made their living by pirating, and were just the kind of people who would double-cross the defenseless people whom they had promised to help. They launched a flood of invasions, and eventually they took over Britain. (King Arthur, as you'll learn later, was a king of the Britons during this particular crisis who attempted to fight off these tribes and very nearly succeeded.)

Once the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes had settled in to Britain and began to get comfortable, they were harder to identify as three distinct tribes and they simply became known as Anglo-Saxons, or Saxons for short. (No one remembers the poor Jutes.) Incidentally, the name England is derived from this period of history. “Angle-land” eventually became England, but the name Britain is a hold over from the earlier period when the Britons held it. Now we tend to use the names almost interchangeably, which is somewhat ironic given that the Britons and the Saxons were bitter and bloody enemies for centuries.

As the Saxons settled the country, they obviously were bringing with them the language, customs, and culture of their homeland. You should imagine England at this moment as being quite a linguistic hodge-podge of Celtic, and Latin, along with the new Saxon language. And the culture itself was a muddle of Celtic paganism, Roman paganism, Saxon paganism, and Christianity. Needless to say, it was a rocky time.

After the Saxons had conquered England and gotten comfortable, they became Christians. Not all of a sudden, obviously, but it did eventually happen. Meanwhile, they were still telling the old heroic stories of their pagan homeland. It was in this context that an unknown Saxon poet put pen to paper and gave us *Beowulf*.

The only surviving manuscript is ambiguously dated as having been written between the eighth and the eleventh centuries. (Tolkien, incidentally, believed it to have been written in the eighth century.) The story itself, however, is set in the early sixth century. In essence, what we have with *Beowulf* is a poet who is living in England telling us the story of something that had happened much earlier, back in the motherland. Whether or not the poet composed the poem from scratch, or was merely writing down a previously existing poem which had been orally preserved is unknown.

THE POEM

There are many questions surrounding *Beowulf*, the most obvious of which is, “Is it true?” As you read it, you’ll notice things that couldn’t possibly have happened, and you may then be tempted to write the whole thing off as impossible. However, although Beowulf himself is not mentioned in any other historical accounts that we possess, several of the other characters are known to be actual figures in history, which is how we can date the events of the poem as having occurred in the early sixth century.

As Christians, how do we deal with the “fantastical” elements of stories like this one? Dragons? Monsters? Really? We’re enlightened twenty-first century moderns, and we know better than to believe in those kinds of silly things, right? But sometimes we need to take a quick look around us and notice all the things that we do actually believe. Things that turn up at odd moments in the Old Testament: giants, dragons, pillars of salt, fallen angels, fiery chariots. Turns out we believe in lots of things that make enlightened twenty-first century moderns snicker. But if we do actually believe Scripture, and if we do actually think those things really happened, then the conclusion we must inevitably come to is that the world is a much crazier place than twenty-first century moderns like to think. So what do we do with stories like this one then? Do we decide that crazy things happened in Canaan but nowhere else?

There are several things to keep in mind. On the one hand, we can’t write off these kinds of stories the way an atheistic evolutionist materialist would. But on the other hand, we need to remember is that we believe the events of Scripture actually happened because we know that Scripture is inspired by God, and we don’t actually think anything of the kind about *Beowulf*. Just because the world is a crazy place doesn’t mean that every crazy story is true.

So as you read, try and keep those two things in mind and then ask yourself how you think the story of *Beowulf* fits into that framework.

Another major issue that confuses people when they read *Beowulf*

is, “Is this a Christian poem or not?” That’s actually a really interesting question, and one that you should keep in mind as you read. Remember the context in which the poem was written. The Saxons had taken over England, they were Christian now, and this is a story of something that happened several centuries before during the pre-Christian era. There are frequent references to Scripture, but only to the Old Testament, never to the New. Beowulf is clearly a noble hero, but not clearly a Christian. The poet is sympathetic with these people, but also doesn’t paper over their flaws. At first glance you would think that Beowulf is cast as a Christ figure, but at the same time, there appears to be no ultimate hope in the poem. As you read, try to keep this question in mind, and see if you can formulate an opinion of what the poet is doing with this.

There are a number of themes woven throughout this narrative that may need a word or two of explanation before you start reading so that you can better understand the poem. Keep these in mind as you make your way through.

The Mead-Hall. In Anglo-Saxon society, the mead-hall was at the center of life. It was a huge feasting hall, and, as foreshadowed in the name, it was where mead was served. (Mead being a fermented honey drink.) But it was more than just that. In the mead-hall, the warriors swore oaths of allegiance to their lord, and the lord gave treasure to his men. This giving of treasure was called ring-giving, and because of this, the king was called the **Ring-Giver**. His loyal warriors were called **Thanes**. When war broke out, as it frequently did, the bonds that held the men together were the oaths they had sworn in the mead-hall. They owed their lives and their allegiance to their ring-giver because of his generosity to them. This presents a really interesting concept of government, one that is very unfamiliar to us. For the Saxons, the king was the central giver and therefore the one to whom allegiance is owed. In our system, we give our money to the government because we owe them our allegiance. As you read, pay attention to this relationship, because it is foundational to the Saxon way of life, and therefore to the story of *Beowulf*.

Saxon life was tribal, and frequently there was trouble between the clans. Let's say two men from different tribes had a disagreement and one killed the other. The victim's clan would then come to retaliate, and because of the way the world always works, they would escalate the situation and kill (lets' say) three of the opposing tribe as payment for their fallen friend. Then that tribe would feel deeply wronged, and would gear up and come to get some payback, and they would kill ten men as payment for the fallen three. You see the problem I assume. These vicious cycles were called **Blood-Feuds**, and once a blood-feud had gotten under way there was virtually no way out of it aside from the two clans mutually exterminating each other. The blood-feuds were fueled by the Saxons' sense of allegiance to their comrades, as well as a system of morality in which **Vengeance** was seen as justice.

Sometimes, in the midst of a vicious blood-feud, there would be an attempt to pull out of it. A common method of trying to establish peace was by means of a **Peace-Weaver**. This was a woman from one tribe, who was given in marriage to someone from the opposing clan. The idea here was that the two clans would then be related, and would therefore call a halt to the killing. How often this was actually successful I have no idea, but the author of *Beowulf* is clearly very skeptical of the concept. Peace-weavers show up in a number of places in the poem, but always in a tragic role and without any hope that it's going to work out in the end.

When you consider the importance of the mead-hall, of loyalty, of avenging fallen comrades, it's unsurprising then to find out that **Kin-Killing** was seen as the ultimately grotesque crime. A man who killed a member of his own family had turned the universe upside down. He had killed one he should have died to avenge, he had become the enemy, and he had brought the blood-feud right into the mead-hall. The idea of the kin-killer is a major theme throughout this poem, and one to definitely pay attention to as you read. Try to figure out what the poet is saying when he brings this in.

One last note. The Saxon word for poet is **Scop** - pronounced "shope."

We get our modern English word *shape* from this. A poet was a shaper, one who shapes with his words. A cool and somewhat profound link to this, is that God is the ultimate Shaper, the one who shaped heaven and earth with His Word. For the Saxons, the role of poet was a very important one, because it mimicked God as Creator. Different cultures tend to relate to God in different ways and focus on different aspects of His character. The Saxons saw God fundamentally as Creator. He was the ultimate Scop. Because of this, they valued their own poets very highly, and saw them in the role of sub-creators.

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;

10 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,

20 The pride of great princes, the pride of his family.

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.

Here is a good synopsis of the Ring-giver / thane relationship

Notice what we are told about the burial of a king: Shield was piled up with treasure and pushed out to sea in his ship. He left this life the way he entered it, floating alone on a ship piled with treasure.

It's also important to notice that this story opens with the funeral of a king.

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.

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—

The weight of that wealth, and the warriors whose
tribute,

Would sail with this ship with it sent far away,
Their purpose presenting him to the power of the
flood.

They decked out his death, and dealt with him
bountifully,

No little gifts, no less than left with him as a babe,
When set adrift on seas and waves, 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,

30

40

The ship they let slide to sea it departed.
50 With minds full of mourning, no man here can say,
No wise man, no warrior, no wizened hall scop¹
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 king for the Danes
Through a 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 a father of four, this fighter and chieftain.
60 One after another they entered this world,
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,
And mighty grew his men, a masterful army!
So a command came to him, the king thought to
build
A royal hall, rising in fame, erected by guildsmen,
With gables and glory and greatness forever,
70 A mead hall, a marvel, for men to speak of forever.
There his throne would be, and thriving with gifts,
He would give out those gifts, all that God had
bestowed—

*Note the use of
"middle-earth,"
a common Saxon
image which
was picked up by
Tolkien.*

*That's some
ominous
foreshadowing.
They're only just
building Hereot
and we already are
hearing how it's
going to go down
in the end.*

*Notice that the
poet is singing
about God as
Creator. This was
how the Saxons
fundamentally
related to God.*

Kingly gifts, but no common lands, or cruel giving of
souls.

This royal hall, as 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 its 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,

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 sang their songs, and the strings were well

played,

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.¹

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

quickenings.

¹ Back-coinage from *helwaru*, meaning inhabitant of Hell.

80

90

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 good Heaven again and again
 Until the time came for the Titans' great judgment.

*Grendel isn't just a
 horrible monster,
 he's a monster
 descended from
 the first kin-killer.
 We are supposed
 to see Grendel as
 the embodiment
 of kin-killing
 treachery. Notice
 that what upsets
 him is the joy and
 the fellowship in
 the mead-hall.*

THIRD FITT

GRENDEL KILLS THIRTY, HEOROT DESERTED

Quietly night came, and creeping, Grendel as well,
 To spy out the safety of the soldiers' great mead-hall,
 To see how they slept after savoring beer.
 Great nobles were nodding and never disturbed,
 Lost to sadness and sorrow, summoned in peace,
 120 Dead in their dreams. The damned spirit came

suddenly,
Furious, fierce and formidable in anger
Grim and greedy he grasped thirty men
From their rest and he rushed to the refuge of home,
Flushed in his fury, inflamed in his hatred,
The bodies he butchered, in bulk he took them.
The grim dawn's gloaming light gave to disaster,
The depth of destruction was done and forever.
Wails from warriors, their weeping was heavy,
The morning for mourning, their mighty chieftain,
So long their leader, so lifted by grief.

130

That strong king suffered, stricken with sorrow,
He thought of his thanes, he thought on their loss,
Aghast at the ghoul's carnage, grieving his men,
He looked on the loathsome tracks left by the
monster.
He was stunned, struck numb, but severed from hope,
The very next night their nemesis came back,
Striking again, slaughtering more, savoring murder,
Malignant, malicious, no remorse for his sinning.
So then the thanes shifted, the thanes moved their
bedding,
Seeking rest somewhere, somewhere other than
Heorot,
Sleeping in some of the scattered outbuildings.

140

Who but the blind would bed down in there?
Who could not conceive that conqueror's deep
hatred?
Whoever escaped kept always away.
So Grendel in greed held goodness at bay,

One against all, that one against many,
Till greed toppled greatness. The ghost hall, deserted,
Stood wasted twelve winters of woes in their seasons.
The Shielding lord suffered, his sorrows were deep,
150 In terrible torment, his torment in grieving.
All tribes heard the telling, and retold the lays,
Sad mournful music of the murders of Grendel,
How Hrothgar was hated and the hall was deserted.
The feuding ferocious, the fighting was spiteful,
Nothing but war, nothing, and nothing but battle.
No peace and no parley, no peace-price accepted,
The Danes must all die, he dealt nothing but anger.
No herald could hope to hold an agreement,
Given as gift by those gut-bloodied hands.
160 Instead the sick monster would stealthily wait,

The Danes are called "Shieldings" not because they are so excited about their shields, but because they are descended from Shield.

As darkened death-shadow, a dim ambushade,
Waiting for warriors, a wicked hot malice,
On moors that were misty, where men cannot know
How these whispering warlocks, these wights from
Hell glide.
So crimes he committed, cruelties plentiful,
That fiend in his frenzy, that fiend in his hatred.
He made Heorot his home, haunting at midnight,
Ghostly and gliding in the glittering hall,
But the thought of the throne was a thought filled
with horror,
170 He could not come near it, because he was an
outcast.
Heartbreaking hard times were these held by the
Shieldings,
Their princes, their planners, their powerful

counselors
Would come offer counsel to their king in his
grieving,
Plotting and planning their path of resistance,
How best to give battle with brave men and warriors.
Weary, they wavered at times worshipping idols,
Summoning sacrifices, saying old words aloud,
Praying the demon who damns would deliver them.
Old customs were curious but comfort was missing. 180
Their hope was in Hell, and their heathenish ways,
In dire need and deep thoughts they did not know
God,
The Lord who loves justice, the Lord judges our
deeds.
The High King of Heaven, the holiest one,
Was not known to them though they needed his
wisdom.
Cursed is the coldness of comfort deceiving,
That thrusts a poor thane in a thicket of fire,
Forfeiting help and forgiveness forever.
But blessed is the man who busy in prayer,
Can deal with the dying and deliberately seek
The Father's great fellowship and final protection. 190

FOURTH FITT

HROTHGAR BROODS, BEOWULF SAILS

*Now the action
moves away from
Denmark and
over to Geatland
and the court of
Hygelac. See map.*

In that troubled time the trouble continued,
No stop to the sorrow and steady affliction.
So soon Halfdane's son had strife far too great.
Night terrors, night panics, and never a respite
From the cruel spirit's spite and sputtering envy.