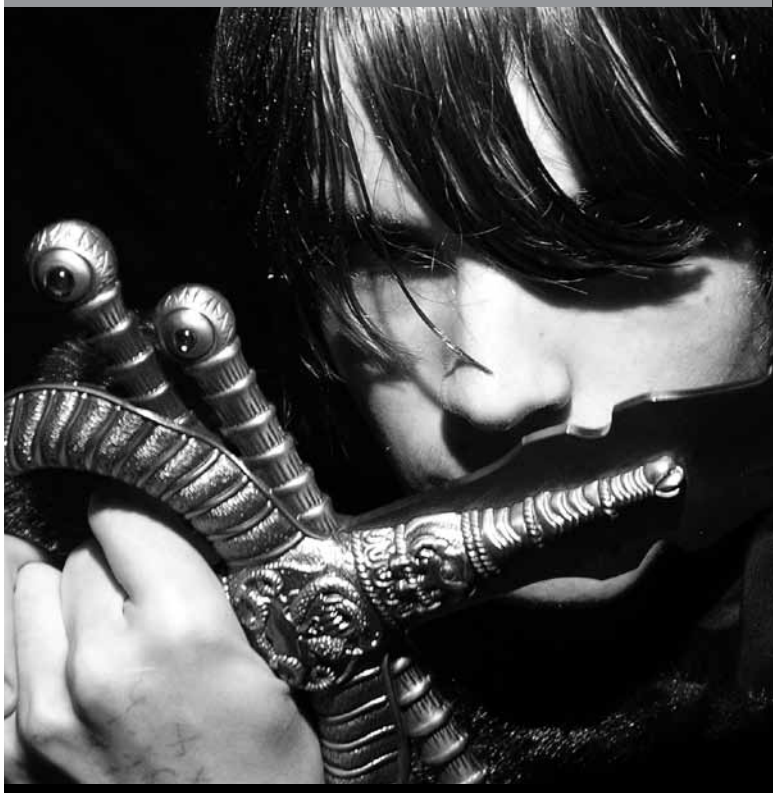
PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

BEOWULF

Edited by M.A. Roberts

UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

Beowulf



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Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

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Cover: Photography by Larry Knox
The Great Sword from the Days of Giants provided by Actors Attic of Dover, Delaware (www.actorsattic.com).

Production: Dana Kerr

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ISBN 978-1-58049-348-2

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What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

The epic poem *Beowulf* was written in Old English, also called Anglo-Saxon, the language spoken on the island of Great Britain after the arrival of the Angles and Saxons around 500 A.D. Their language survived and evolved until the Normans conquered the island in 1066.

The author of *Beowulf* is unknown, as is the date of its original composition—although some suppose that the saga was written sometime in the 7th or 8th century. Numerous recitations likely embellished the story and its characters with fantastic elements and exaggerated character traits, including godlike wisdom, intelligence, and nearly superhuman strength and abilities. The poem was most assuredly part of the previous oral tradition of story telling.

Beowulf exists in its present form through one manuscript only, which was penned in the 10th or early 11th century, and it barely escaped a fire in 1731 at the Ashburnham House in Westminster, England.

The full translation did not appear until 1815, and even at that date, it was written in Latin. *Beowulf* was not commonly included in English literature courses until the middle part of the 20th century, after acclaimed author and linguistics professor J.R.R. Tolkien published an essay titled "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." This essay posited that *Beowulf* was a work of poetic literature, rather than merely an historic document.

This prose edition of *Beowulf* has combined and reconciled the 1892 prose translation by John Earle with the 1910 verse translation by Francis Gummere. These two translations differ considerably from one another textually, although the style and plot lines are similar. When the two translations varied a great deal, we consulted other texts to arrive at a satisfactory resolution of the discrepancies.

For example, Earle's prose version begins:

> *"What ho! we have heard tell of the grandeur of the imperial kings of the spear-bearing Danes in former days, how those ethelings promoted bravery."*

Gummere begins his verse translation:

> *"LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings*
> *of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,*
> *we have heard, and what honor the athelings*
> *won!"*

Ethelings or *athelings* directly translates as sons of kings

The Prestwick House prose version combines the better parts of both texts, changing a few words and reading:

> *"Hark! We have heard of the glory of the kings of men among the spear-bearing Danes in days of long ago. We have heard how the princes won renown!"*

We have made every effort to ensure that the text is readable and still retains the essence of both translations.

When a segment of text is surrounded by brackets, it indicates that a section of the original manuscript has been badly damaged or corrupted, possibly due to the 1731 fire. Chapters XXIX and XXX fall into this category. Prestwick House has followed the Gummere translation, which eliminated both chapters. Other translators have approximated the meanings of some passages, but the actual wording is not at all certain.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. *Beowulf*, like almost all Anglo-Saxon poetry, is written with a great deal of alliteration. Alliteration occurs when two or more words in close proximity to one another begin with the same sound. As an example of alliteration, examine the following phrase from our prose rendition:

   > *A foundling was he when he first lay friendless; fate later brought him solace as he waxed in power and flourished in wealth, until folk who lodge on the whale-paths near and far heeded his decree and gave him tribute—that was a good king!*

   - The consonant *f* sound is repeated numerous times [*foundling*, *first*, *friendless*, *fate, flourished, folk,* and *far*]. The *w* sound of *was, when, waxed, wealth,* and *whale* is another example of the poem's alliteration.

   - The alliterative verse structure in the original Anglo-Saxon follows several rules dealing with which words could and should alliterate. A pause, or *cæsura*, was inserted in the middle of each line of poetry, dividing the line into two parts. The words that were most strongly pronounced or given emphasis in the line were usually the alliterated words. The *Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classic*™ rendition of *Beowulf* is in prose and does not follow this specific Anglo-Saxon structure. In all other aspects, however, we have remained faithful to commonly accepted translations.

2. The Anglo-Saxon language of *Beowulf* is filled with compound words called *kennings,* which, in modern terms, are similar to *euphemisms,* or *periphrases*. For example, the term *whale-paths* indicates the oceans, *wave-rider* is a boat or ship, *ring-giver*, *folk-friend*, or *friend to the people* stands for a king, and a *word-hoard* simply means a vocabulary. This usage is evocative of the subject as the writer conceived it—in

this way, kennings often indicate an opinion *about* a noun as well as identifying it. A king, for instance, is one who gives objects of worth or treasure to his supporters; this is the role that the author indicates a king should fulfill. Through the Old English kennings, the idea that the word represents became the word itself. In addition, kennings, because of their multi syllabic nature, allowed poets to choose phrases that would best fit the verse structure of the poem.

3. At many points in the narrative, the characters are not referred to by name. Hrothgar, for instance, is identified as the *white-haired one, a venerable king, a mighty ring-giver,* and so forth. The term *ring-giver* refers to the custom of a king taking golden jewelry he is wearing and bestowing it upon worthy heroes and liegemen.

4. Characters are also referenced by their family relations. Here is a list of common terms for the book's characters:

Hrothgar:
- shield of the Danes/of the people
- helmet/crown of the Danes
- friend of the Scyldings
- son of Healfdene
- chief of Ing's descendants
- lord of the Ingwines
- white-haired
- gold-friend of men

Beowulf
- son of Ecgtheow
- ring-giver (later in the book, when he returns home and becomes king)

Unferth
- Hrothgar's orator
- Ecglaf's son/son of Ecglaf

5. There are also several points in the saga where the plot digresses, and the narrative tells the story of other legendary people. During various feasts in Heorot (the massive gathering hall of the Danish people), a bard or minstrel breaks into song and tells the tale of another king or hero from Scandinavian lore. Each miniature tale corresponds or

contrasts in some way to the characters in the larger saga. Beowulf, for example, is contrasted to Heremod: Beowulf is generous and brave, but Heremod is portrayed as mean-spirited and cowardly. These other tales serve to highlight the character traits of the main heroes of the saga.

6. *Beowulf* includes many juxtapositions of pagan and Christian references. The names of the heathen gods have been omitted from the poem itself, but there are still many references to *Fate (Wyrd)* or *destiny,* and the author seems to simultaneously extol both the pursuit of worldly fame and the reliance upon Providence/God. Note that the figure of a boar, which is often mentioned as being mounted on warriors' helmets for protection, is a symbol of *Freyr*, a Germanic god. Freyr is never mentioned by name; however, at other points in the narrative, the author condemns heathen worship.

    - It is quite likely—albeit impossible to confirm—that the *Beowulf* we now read is altered somewhat from the version known to early Anglo-Saxons. The saga comes from a time when Anglo-Saxon society was in transition from polytheistic pagan religions to Christianity. Numerous references throughout the poem are attributable to Christian beliefs, but others are obviously not. As an example, after his death, no mention is made of Beowulf's entering heaven; he is, in fact, burned on his funeral pyre, a distinctly pagan ritual. Grendel, even though depicted as an inhuman monster, is frequently equated with Cain, the son of Adam.

7. Note the following values of Anglo-Saxon society that are exhibited in *Beowulf*:

    - Fame and renown among those who are alive is paramount. Fame is primarily achieved through victorious combat and heroic deeds, which will be turned into a tale that will survive one's death. The final lines of the epic praise Beowulf's virtues, especially that he was *lof-geornost*, or *the most eager for fame.*

    - The king, or chieftain, is the *shield, shelterer,* and *protector* of the people: He would give up his life for his people. Good kings and chieftains should be generous with their wealth and richly reward those who serve them well. Weak or bad kings, however, would hoard their wealth, not reward their liegemen, and be cruel or

unjust—they do not care for or about their people. A group without a king is vulnerable and weak—the lives of individuals in a leaderless group are filled with sorrow, as other tribes can attack them and cause devastation.

- Bravery in battle is a sign of loyalty to a lord because this gains fame, honor, and treasure for him. It is extremely important to be loyal to one's ruler, family, and clan. Good subjects, thanes, and vassals fight for their lord; bad ones will shrink in fear when combat comes.

Chapter I

THEN THE TASK of keeping the strongholds fell to Beow, well-loved by the Scyldings. Long he ruled in fame after his father left the world, 'till in time an heir was born to him: the noble Healfdene, sage and warlike, who ruled the gracious Scyldings while he lived. Four children in succession awoke into the world from him, the chieftain of armies: Heorogar, Hrothgar, Halga the good, and Elan; I heard she was queen and dear helpmate of Ongentheow, the warlike Scylfing.

To Hrothgar was given the glories of war and such honor in combat that all his kin took him as leader, and his band of young comrades grew great. It came to his mind to order his men to build a hall, a master mead-house far mightier than any seen by the sons of earth, and therein would he bestow to young and old all that the Lord should give him, save people's land and the lives of men.

I heard that orders to craft the gathering place were widely sent to many tribes throughout the earth. His plan achieved with swiftness, that hall, the greatest of buildings, stood there ready. He, whose words held dominion in many lands, gave it the name Heorot. Nor did he go back on his promise, but distributed rings and treasure at the banquet. The hall towered high, with pinnacles spanning the sky, as it awaited the scathing blasts of deadly flame. The day had not yet come when father and son-in-law stood by with blade-baring hatred, stirred by a blood feud.

Then an evil creature who dwelt in darkness, full of envy and anger, was tormented by the hall's jubilant revel day by day, as the harps resounded loud, and the song of the singer called out clearly. The singer

sang with the knowledge of tales from man's primeval time: how the Almighty fashioned the earth—a radiant plain rimmed by water—and delighted in its splendor; how He set the sun and moon as lights for the inhabitants of the land, adorned the earth's expanses with tree limbs and leaves, and made the life of all mortal beings that breathe and move.

Thus the clan's life was one of good cheer and revel until that fiend of hell began to work evils. Grendel was this grim beast called, who haunted the moors and secluded fens; this accursed one had long dwelled with monsters since the Creator had decreed his exile. On the kin of Cain did the sovereign God avenge the slaughter of Abel; Cain gained nothing from this feud and was driven far from the sight of men for that slaughter. From him awoke all those dire breeds: ogres, elves, and phantoms that warred with God a lengthy while; He paid their wage to them!

CHAPTER II

AS SOON AS night had come, Grendel set out to explore the lofty abode and to mark how the Ring-Danes had gone to rest within it after their revelry was done. He found the regal band sleeping inside after the feast, unaware of woe or human hardship. That heathen wight was right ready: fierce and reckless, he snatched thirty thanes from their slumber, then sped homeward, carrying his spoils and roaring over his prey as he sought his lair.

At dawn, the break of day, Grendel's deeds of war were made plain to men; thus, so soon after the festivities, a voice of wailing was lifted up, and in the morning was heard a great cry. The illustrious ruler, the excellent prince, sat without mirth; he wrestled with woe—the loss of his thanes, once they traced the monster's trail, brought him grief—this contest was cruel, long, and loathsome. It was a time not longer than one night before the beast committed more murders, thinking nothing of this atrocity; such was the guilt in which he was steeped. It was easy to find men who sought rest at night in remote rooms, making their beds among the hall's bowers, once the conspicuous proof of this hell-thane's malice was made manifest. Whosoever escaped the fiend kept at a distance and put up his guard.

So he reigned in terror and raged nefariously against one and all until that majestic building stood empty, and it remained long in this state. Twelve years did the Scyldings' sovereign bear this trouble, having many woes and unending travails. Thus in time the tidings became well-known among the tribes of men through ballads of lament: how unceasing was Grendel's harassment of Hrothgar and what hate he bore him, and what

GLOSSARY

PRELUDE

Danes – the residents of Denmark. Hrothgar, Hrothulf, and the Scylding dynasty of kings mentioned in *Beowulf* are actually spoken of in other Danish and Germanic sources (such as the poem *Widsith*). Some believe that Heorot, the hall of the Danes mentioned in Beowulf, was located on the island of Sjaelland, near the modern-day city of Roskilde, Denmark.

mead-benches – A mead-bench is a seat found in a mead-hall, a fortress and gathering place for medieval Norse and Germanic tribes. Members of society could gather there in safety under the king or chieftain's protection so that they could feast, listen to or tell stories, and receive gifts from the king. It is interesting to note that *Valhalla* and *Folkvang*, two divine mead-halls from Scandinavian mythology, are the places where dead souls go in the afterlife. The mead-hall is the center of this society, and Grendel's attack on the hall is, therefore, an assault upon the fabric of society itself.

CHAPTER I

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CHAPTER II

blood-gold – The act of paying "blood-gold" (*wergild, which means "price of a man"*) was a method of forestalling vengeance in Scandinavian societies. If one man killed another, he or his family could pay money to the bereaved relatives to keep them from bringing death upon the original killer (and his relatives) in turn. The amount to be paid was generally dependent on the social rank of the individual who was killed. This was a method for ending the cycle of blood feuds that could (and did) ravage these societies.

CHAPTER III

Geats – According to the poem, the Geats were a seafaring tribe from the south of Sweden; they appear to have been conquered at some point in the early Middle Ages. Gregory of Tours mentions that a group of "Danes" led by "Chochilaicus" (a possible Latinization of "Hygelac") attacked the Franks around 520 A.D. Little other historical information is written about the Geats.

CHAPTER IV – CHAPTER XV

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VOCABULARY

PRELUDE

bedecked – decorated
foundling – an orphan; abandoned infant
hence – "from here"; away
mail – a coat of flexible metal armor, usually comprised of interlocking rings or metal scales
stalwart – brave; hardy, sturdy, strong
tenure – the time period during which one holds an office or position
waxed – grew
wrested – forced from or took by force

CHAPTER I

dire – dreadful, threatening
fens – swamps, marshes, bogs
jubilant – joyful; triumphant
pinnacles – peaks
sovereign – a king, ruler

CHAPTER II

arbiter – a judge
betimes – sometimes, at times
bowers – private rooms in a medieval hall
brook – to tolerate
illustrious – renowned for a position or deed
lament – grief, sorrow
nefariously – evilly, wickedly
parley – a meeting between hostile parties to discuss peace
sore – serious; difficult
thanes – people who hold lands from their lord; liegemen, soldiers
travails – sorrows; hardships
unremittant – without pause, unceasing
wight – a living being; a creature

CHAPTER III

assuage – to relieve
fain – happily; willingly
fare – journey; move
gainsaid – contradicted; spoke against; contrary to
haven – a safe place; a calm harbor where ships can anchor
headlands – points of land that project into a body of water