



## **UNDERSTANDING BEOWULF**

**Robert A. Albano**

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**MERCURY PRESS**

**Los Angeles**

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First Printing: July 2014

The chapters on *Beowulf* first appeared in *Lectures on English Literature: The Middle Ages* (Taipei: Bookman, 2001).

“The Role of Women in Anglo-Saxon Culture: Hildeburh in *Beowulf* and a Curious Counterpart in the *Volsunga Saga*” first appeared in *English Language Notes* (September 1994).

“Norton’s *Beowulf* in Verse vs. Norton’s *Beowulf* in Prose” first appeared in the *Taiwan Journal of English Literature* (January 2007).

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## Preface

Several decades ago, during my own undergraduate years, I encountered *Beowulf* three times: in a Humanities course, in a Folklore course, and in a Survey of English Literature course. On none of those occasions, though, did I thoroughly understand or enjoy the Anglo-Saxon poem. I should have enjoyed it, though. After all, I grew up reading Greek and Roman and Norse mythology; and I first encountered J.R.R. Tolkien's glorious dragon Smaug when I was in elementary school. I was also an avid reader of comic books who was always on the alert to enjoy a good monster or two. But the monsters in *Beowulf*, although enjoyable to me, were not as vibrant or exciting as their modern counterparts.

Part of the blame, though, must go to the instructors. My Humanities professor only considered the literary work within the broader context of the history, philosophy, and art of early Europe. Worse yet, my Folklore professor saw *Beowulf* as a collection of folkloric elements suitable only for comparison to other works of folklore. And my English Literature professor was a specialist in Renaissance literature, and she viewed *Beowulf* only as a work to get through as soon as possible – a necessary evil forced upon her because the title appeared in the English Department's course description. None of these professors had ever studied the Anglo-Saxon language. And none of them appreciated *Beowulf* as a work of poetry.

Not until many years later, after several years of high school teaching, did I decide to return to life as a student and to pursue a Ph.D. Initially intending to write a dissertation on nineteenth-century American novels, I changed my area of emphasis after taking a course on Old English (the alternative name for Anglo-Saxon language). I became a medievalist, and that decision changed my view of all early English literature. My becoming a medievalist was a fortuitous circumstance, yet it was not one that I ever regretted.

As a medievalist, I soon found myself yet again taking a course in which I had to study *Beowulf*. But this time it was



different. I was reading *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon tongue. And, for the first time, I learned to appreciate this first long narrative in the English language. *Beowulf* is an important work of literature not because it is early or first or historically significant: it is important because it is a fine work of literature. It is important because it is a magnificent poem.

After receiving my doctorate degree, I became a professor of English literature and found myself in the daunting task of attempting to explain the importance of *Beowulf* to undergraduate students. An even more daunting task is to instill the students with an appreciation of the Anglo-Saxon poem's artistic merits. These students, after all, have not studied the Anglo-Saxon language; and in all probability they never will. Such students, then (and unfortunately), can only encounter the poem indirectly.

For years professors have been debating which translation to use for undergraduate studies. I first started using the prose translation by E. Talbot Donaldson for the simple reason that it was the mainstay of the *Norton Anthology* for decades. However, some scholars got the imprudent notion in their heads that a poetic translation would better serve the needs of the undergraduate student because a poem should be translated as a poem.

The thinking is not really sound. Take any great poetic passage from Shakespeare and translate it into another language. No matter how excellent the poetic translation may be, the passage is no longer the invention of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's unique phrasing, his nuances of thought and tone, are absent in the translation. The translation is just a pale copy. Poems are unique works that are wholly dependent upon the language in which they are written. A poetic translation depends upon an entirely different language structure and an entirely different culture.

The culture and language of the Anglo-Saxons (even though Old English forms the basis of modern English) are nevertheless unique in their own right and bear too many differences to be considered the same. Thus, a translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem into Modern English poetry is as different as a poetic passage from Shakespeare translated into Hindi verse.

Nevertheless, dozens upon dozens of poetic translations of *Beowulf* have found their way into print. Each new version comes with the claim that it has reproduced the Anglo-Saxon original more accurately and more authentically than any previous translation. Each new poetic version comes with the claim, then, that it has succeeded in accomplishing the impossible.

For that reason, a solid prose translation – despite its artistic failings – is still the best choice when it comes to introducing readers approaching *Beowulf* for the first time.

Prose translations of poems will fail to give students the artistic appreciation of the original literary work. However, prose translations of poems are more accurate in capturing the meaning of the originals. Thus, in teaching *Beowulf* (or any poetic work in translation) to undergraduates, the wise professor will attempt to provide students with an understanding of the work, yet (albeit regrettably) hold off on the attempt to foster any appreciation of the artistic merits of the poem. That will only come when the student studies the original language.



# Chapter 1

## HISTORY OF ENGLAND

Old English is far different from Modern English and is actually more Germanic in grammar and vocabulary. If we know a few facts about the history of England, we can see why this is so.

From 50 BC to about 450 AD, England was dominated by Rome. There were some native tribes living in England, such as the Britons, the Picts, and the Scots. These natives spoke in a Celtic language, not in English. The Romans introduced the Latin language and Christianity to England, but these Roman features did not survive when the Romans left around 450. At that time Rome was having great difficulties protecting itself against invaders, and they had to recall all of their soldiers to defend the Roman Empire (which would soon fall).

This left the possession of England back in the hands of the native Celtic tribes, but much fighting occurred among these tribes. Further, one of the Celtic leaders (according to one historical source) made the mistake of asking for help from their neighbors in Germanic lands. The Germanic tribes came originally to help the Celtic leader, but soon realized that the island of England seemed like an ideal place to settle. With Rome out of the way, England was practically free for the taking.

The names of the Germanic tribes who came to England were the Angles, the Saxons, the Frisians, the Jutes, and others. The first two were the most predominant. The Germanic warriors eventually overpowered the smaller Celtic forces and settled permanently in England. Today, many English regions are still named after the two largest Germanic tribes: East Anglia, Wessex (West Saxon), Sussex (South Saxon), and Essex (East Saxon).

Eventually, the language of these invaders soon began to replace the Celtic languages as the predominant language of the land; and as this Germanic language grew and developed somewhat differently from what was happening in the German lands, the birth of the English language takes place. This spoken

language is usually named Anglo-Saxon after the two Germanic tribes that dominated the region. However, given our historical perspective, we also call their language Old English.

The language of the original inhabitants, the Celts, still survives today. As the Angles and Saxons took over southern and eastern England, some of the Celts headed west to what is modern Wales today and others headed north to Scotland. The Welsh language is one surviving example of the original Celtic dialects.

## THE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

The history (and literature) of England is dominated by a Christian influence. But this was not always the case. The Romans had brought Christianity to England with them before 450. However, when the Romans left England, so too did the religion. It was not until the year 597 that the missionary St. Augustine came from Rome to convert the pagan tribes of England to Christianity. So successful was the mission of St. Augustine (who should not be confused with the popular 4th century philosopher of the same name) that by 700, within a period of approximately 100 years, the majority of people in England had converted to the Catholic faith.

One of the earliest surviving works of literature from England in this early period is the *Historia Ecclesiastica* (a religious history of England) written in Latin by a churchman named Bede. This religious document from the year 731 is important not only because it reveals the growth and development of Christianity in England but also because it provides the best history of early England for that time period.

## WAR AND CONFLICT

This history of England is also dominated by conflict. First there was the conflict between the Romans and the Celtic tribes. Then there were the internal conflicts among the various Celtic tribes after the Romans left. Later there was the conflict between the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons. And once the Celts were pushed aside, there were the internal conflicts among the various Germanic tribes. England was a land of many kingdoms, and the Germanic desire for land continued to be a reason for conflict for many years.

During the 9th century, the conflicts increased even more: invaders from the Scandinavian countries came to England and realized how easy it would be to take land from a people lacking any sense of unity. These invaders, known as the Norse or Vikings or Danes, came close to conquering all of England. If they had succeeded, there would have been no England and no English language today.

Fortunately, one of the Saxon kings, King Alfred of Wessex, later to be known as Alfred the Great (871-899), united England at the end of the 9th century and was able to put up a stiff resistance against the Viking invaders. Eventually, a treaty of peace was established; but the Anglo-Saxons lost about half of England to the Norse invaders. This northern region of England was known as the Danelaw. The new settlers spoke the Norse language, not Anglo-Saxon. However, the Norse settlers soon were on friendly terms with their Anglo-Saxon neighbors; and business and language exchanges soon became commonplace between them. The English language changed as a result of such exchanges, and even today many Norse words still form a noticeable (but certainly not large) part of the Modern English vocabulary.

Alfred the Great should also be recognized for being a man of learning and letters; and he was, most likely, responsible for establishing one of the most important works of literature in the Old English language: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Although many of its entries are sketchy and incomplete, the *Chronicle* is

important to modern readers because it reveals many details about the development of the English language as well as documenting many historical facts about England.

One of the best surviving literary works from England during the 10th century is the “Battle of Maldon.” This short heroic poem is significant not only because of its literary merits: it is also significant historically because it recounts events of the Viking invasion.



## THE LOST LITERATURE OF ENGLAND

The amount of poetry and even prose literature that has survived from the Old English period is scant. Less than 5% (maybe only 1 or 2%) of all the poetry from that time period survives. There are several reasons for this:

1) The Oral Tradition: During the Middle Ages, most of the people could not read or write. Instead, they had to rely on professional story-tellers (also known as bards or scop) who would memorize long epic poems and recite them to their audiences. These story-tellers would usually take on an apprentice, who would listen to and memorize the tales told by his master. In this fashion, stories could be passed down from one generation to the next for hundreds of years without ever being written down.

2) Destruction Caused by Wars and Conflicts: Pillaging, looting, and burning were common activities of invaders. One of the great monasteries in northeast England, the Monastery at Lindisfarne, was burned during the Viking invasions. This monastery reportedly held the largest library in England at the time.

3) Natural Disasters (flood, fire, storms)

4) The Expense of Parchment: In England at this time sheepskin, or parchment, was used instead of paper. It was very difficult and, hence, expensive to make parchment. Moreover, usually only monks and other members of the Catholic Church knew how to read and write. Since they felt that religious documents were far more important than secular poetry, they would only use parchment for Christian writing.

5) The Re-Use of Parchment: Modern x-rays reveal that many Old English documents once contained previous material, but the letters or characters were scratched out so that a new document could be written instead. Thus, many documents that the Anglo-Saxons considered unimportant were simply erased.

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