

# Beowulf and The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial



Beowulf at the movies - 2007

The value of *Beowulf* as a window on Iron Age society in the North Atlantic was dramatically confirmed by the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship-burial in 1939. This is identified as the tomb of [Raedwold](#), the Christian King of Anglia who died in 475 a.d. – about the time when it is thought that *Beowulf* was composed. The discovery of so much martial equipment and so many personal adornments proved that Anglo-Saxon society was much more complex and advanced than previously imagined. Clearly its leaders had considerable wealth at their disposal – both economic and cultural. And don't you just love his natty little moustache?

*Ne h̅yrde ic cymlicor c̅eol gegyrwan  
hilde-wæpnum ond heaðo-wædum,  
billum ond byrnum; [...]*

I never yet heard of a comelier ship  
better supplied with battle-weapons,  
body-armor, swords and spears ...

(*Beowulf*, ll.38-40.)



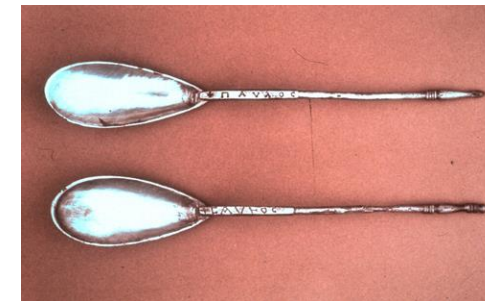
The Sutton Hoo ship and a modern reconstruction



Ornate 5<sup>th</sup>-century head-casque of  
King Raedwold of Anglia



Part of the treasure discovered in a ship-burial of c.500  
at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia – excavated in 1939.



# Caedmon's Creation Hymn (c.658-680 a.d.)

Caedmon's poem was transcribed in Latin by the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the chief prose work of the age of King Alfred and completed in 731, Bede relates that Caedmon was an illiterate shepherd who composed his hymns after he received a command to do so from a mysterious 'man' (or angel) who appeared to him in his sleep.

When he told the visitor that he knew of no subjects to sing about, he was instructed to write about the creation of the world by God. The 'miracle' of his new-found poetical voice was tested by the monks of the monastery of St. Hilda at Whitby, where he lived, who then set him other biblical themes to sing about.

Its survival in manuscript form has had a strange history. It was first given in Latin by Bede and later the original Anglo-Saxon form was added to many of the numerous translations of his *Historia ecclesiastica [History of the English Church]* made in succeeding decades. Moreover, each of these seems to be have been made independently of the others - in other words, each of the 19 scribes who inserted the poem in text knew it by heart, and were not simply copying it from another.

The hymn was thus a popular piece of Anglo-Saxon poetry and part of the original canon of English literature – indeed, it is often described as the first recorded English poem. In itself, it exhibits the usual features of Germanic Heroic Poetry. In particular it observes the rule of alliteration which mark so much of extant Anglo-Saxon verse. The versions given here is found in the *Norton Anthology of English Poetry* (2005) where it appears as the first item, accompanied by a modern English translation by John Pope.

## CÆDMON'S HYMN<sup>1</sup>

Nu sculon herigean  
Now we must praise

Meotodes meabte  
the Measurer's might

wearc Wuldor-Fæder  
the work of the Glory-Father,

ece Drihten  
eternal Lord,

He ærest scop  
He first created

heofon to hrofe  
heaven as a roof,

ða middangeard  
then middle-earth

ece Drihten  
eternal Lord,

firum foldan  
for men earth,

heofonrices Weard  
heaven-kingdom's Guardian,

and his mrodepanc  
and his mind-plans,

swa he wundra gehwæs  
when he of wonders of every one,

or onstealde  
the beginning established,<sup>2</sup>

ielda<sup>3</sup> bearmum  
for men's sons

halig Scyppend  
holy Creator;

moncynnes Weard  
mankind's Guardian,

æfter teode  
afterwards made—

Frea ælmihtig  
Master almighty.

1. Caedmon's 'Hymn' is probably the earliest extant Old English poem (composed sometime between 658 and 680). Old English texts have been preserved in copies of the Latin *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written by the great scholar Bede (ca. 673–735). Bede tells how Caedmon, an illiterate herdsman employed by the monastery of Whitby, miraculously received the gift of religious song, was received by the monks as a lay brother, and founded a school of Christian poetry. At feasts when the farmhands took turns singing and playing the harp, Caedmon would withdraw to his bed in the stable whenever the harp was passed his way. One night a man appeared to him in a dream and commanded, "Caedmon, sing me something." When Caedmon protested that he didn't know how to sing, the man insisted and told him to sing about the Creation. "At this, Caedmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator, which he had never heard before." After transcribing the hymn, Bede remarks that "this is the general sense but not the exact order of the words that [Caedmon] sang in his sleep; for it is impossible to make a literal translation, no matter how well written, of poetry into another language without losing some of the beauty and dignity." Bede refers here to his translation of the poem from Old English to Latin, but the poem also changes significantly from an oral to a written medium.) After Caedmon told the story to his foreman, the monks tested him to establish that the

gift was from God, and he composed other religious poems based on biblical stories they told him. The Germanic tribes had oral poets (the *Beowulf* poetasters such as bard, or 'scop,' performing in the mead hall), and Caedmon might have been trained as such a singer but concealed his knowledge of pagan poetry—what Bede calls "vain and idle songs." The 'Hymn' is typical of Germanic verse: two half-lines, each containing two stressed and two or more unstressed syllables, linked by alliteration; interweaving of syntactically parallel formulaic expressions. For example, eight of the poem's half-lines consist of varying epithets for God: 'Weard' (Guardian), 'Meotod' (Measurer), 'Wuldor-Fæder' (Glory-Father), 'Drihten' (Lord), 'Scyppend' (Creator), and 'Frea' (Master). The poem is given here in a West Saxon form with a literal interlinear translation by John Pope. In Old English spelling, *or* (as in Caedmon's name and line 3) is a vowel symbol that has not survived; it represents the vowel of Modern English *or*; *P* (line 2) and *ð* (line 7) both represent the sound *th*. The large space in the middle of the line indicates the caesura. The alliterating sounds that connect the half-lines have been italicized.

2. I.e., when he established the beginning of every wonder.

3. Later manuscript copies have 'eorþan' (earth) in place of 'ielda' (West Saxon *ield*, meaning 'men's').

# Anglo-Saxon Letters (Old English Orthography)

Anglo-Saxon literature flourished from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century to the date of the Norman Invasion in 1066. The manuscripts produced in that period consist largely of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, some prose-translations of important works such as Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (c.740), and a significant body of poetry - of which only a few including notably *The Seafarer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* have survived. It is impossible to estimate how many others perished during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, orchestrated by Henry VIII – an event which gave full rein to Protestant iconoclasm and cost England so many of its medieval treasures.

*Beowulf* was written down as late as three hundred years after its original composition, a fact which implies an oral tradition in which the poem was preserved over generations by enormous feats of memory on the part of probably-hereditary poets during the pagan period. The prosodic structure of the piece reflects this fact in its use of oral-formulaic devices such as alliteration and the *kenning* (a specifically Anglo-Saxon device). Transcribing it in the Christian era was only possible because there already existed a distinctive Anglo-Saxon alphabet. For the most part the scribes concerned were used to writing in Latin – the original 'Romance language' - but English required a different set of symbols to convey its special sounds such as '-th-' sounds in *teeth* and *then* or the *w* sounds in *why* and *whale*. (A 'y' sound was also needed for Teutonic prefixes such as *ge-* in *geboren* meaning 'born'.)

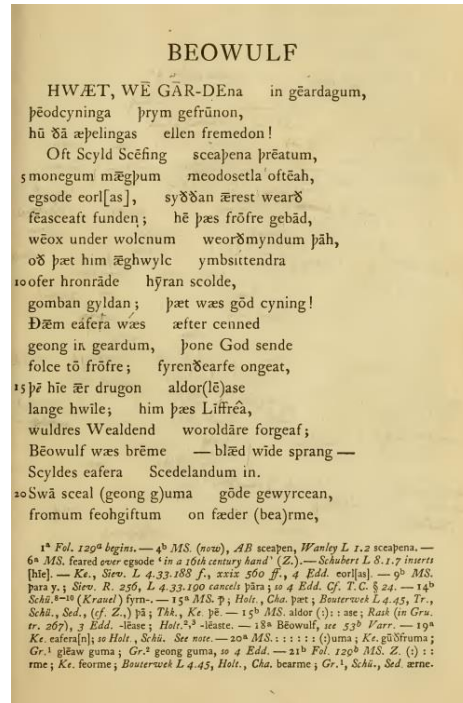
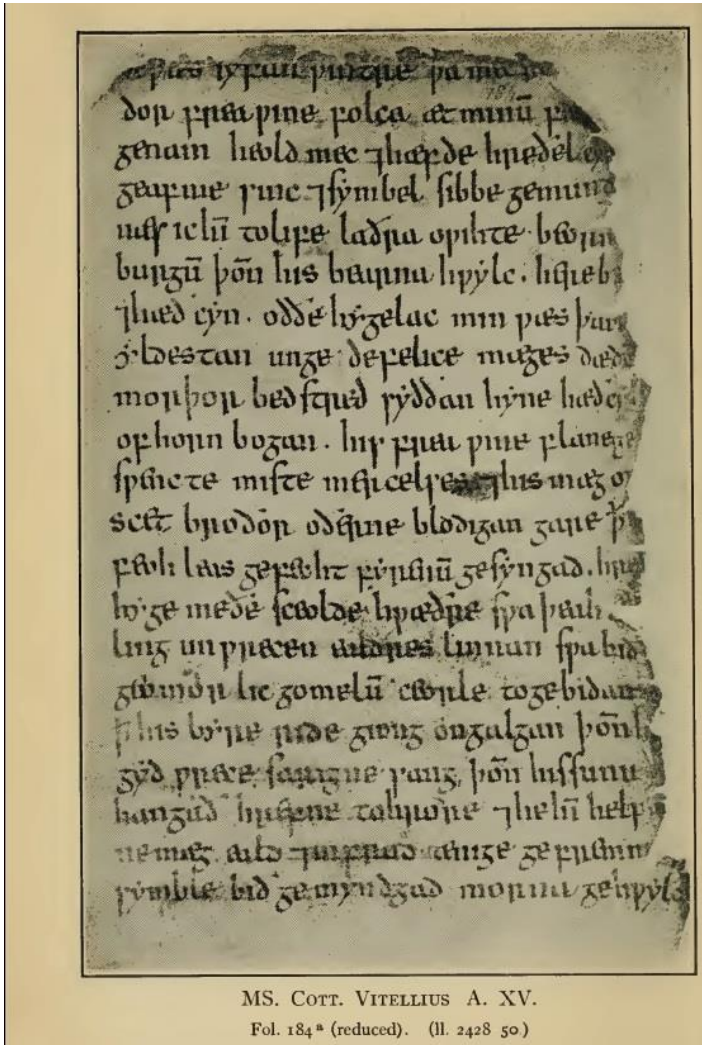
The following distinctive letters were used in Anglo-Saxon (i.e., Old English):

- þ = OE *þorn* ('thorn')
- ð = OE *ðæt* ('eth')
- ƿ = OE *wynn* ('joy')
- ȝ = OE *ēow* ('yew')
- æ = OE *æsc* ('ash')
- *thorn* (þ) and *wynn* (ƿ) were both borrowings from the Germanic rune system (*futhorc*). ð - upper-case Ð – is a modified Latin letter, used for 'th-' and later changeably with þ. ƿ became w.

Unlike the other letters of the alphabet which are purely phonetic, their names derived from an older runic script associated with the Druids of Ancient Britain. In the same way, however, many of other letters were named after common words in which they appeared – man (*man*), horse (*ēoh*), cattle (*feoh*). There is reason to believe that those which were named after trees – such as 'oak', 'ash', 'birch', and 'yew' – derived from the habits of Irish monks who served as missionaries in Britain in post-Roman days. In addition to the standard vowels, some long median vowels – ē, ū, and ā – were also used in written form to reflect differences of pronunciation (*long* and *short*). Sometimes the letter þ alone serves for the whole *þæt* ('that'), and often a kind of ampersand – written as 7 – is used for 'and'.

# Friedrich Klaeber's Edition of "Beowulf" (1922)

Hwaet wē Gar-Dēna in gear-dagum  
 þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon  
 hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon. (*Opening lines.*)



So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by  
 and the kings who ruled them had courage and  
 greatness.  
 We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.  
 (Do., trans. by Seamus Heaney.)



Friedrich Klaeber's scholarly and perceptive edition of *Beowulf* as "The Fight at Finnburg" in 1922 remained the standard guide for more than 50 years and is still indispensable to students. Seamus Heaney's recent translation in verse – commissioned by Norton in 1980 – has given new life to the poem for English readers.

## Interlinear translation ....

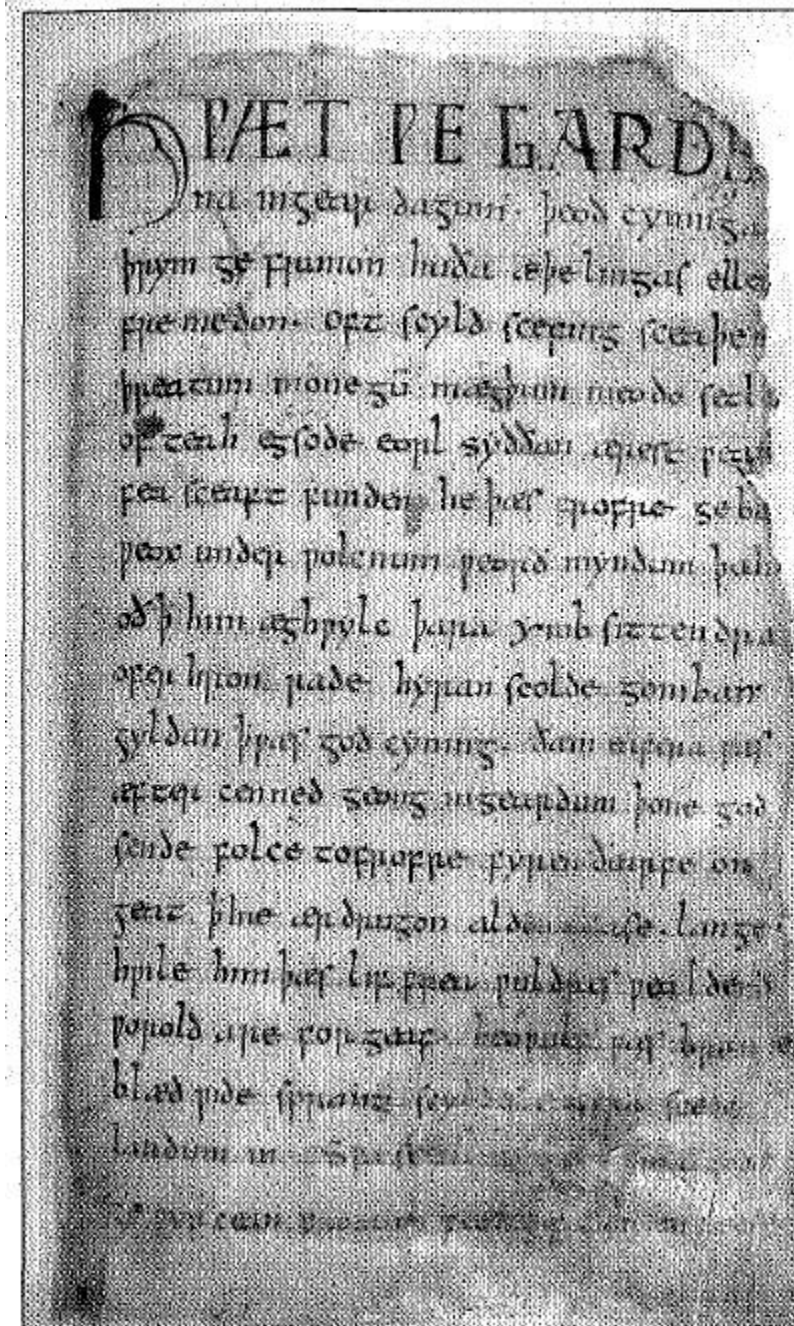
David Crystal gives this transcript-translation of Beowulf in his best-selling *Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1986 & edns.).

Because of Porter's close word-by-word translation, it is possible to identify the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the words he uses and to compare the phonetics and grammar of Old English and Modern English by this means.

You can see here that Old English had declensions with different endings for singular and plural (-a), nominative and accusative. Verbs often had prefixes (e.g., *for-* and *ge-*) as in Modern German, and infinitives often ended in *-an* (e.g., *gyldan*, 'yield') and adjectives came before the noun as in modern English.

Many of the pronouns, demonstrative adjectives and adverbs are recognisably the ancestors of Modern English – e.g., *huða* (how), *þæt* (that), *hwile* ('while') and *aer* ('ere', or 'before').

*Beowulf* (composed c.700; transcribed c.1000; this transcription, J. Zupitza (1882), trans. by J. Porter (1991); given in Crystal, *Encyclopedia of the English Language* [3<sup>rd</sup> Edition] (Cambridge 2010), p.11.



HWÆT WE GARDE-  
What! We Spear-Danes'  
na. in gear-dagum. þeod-cyninga  
in yore-days, tribe-kings'  
þrym ge-frunon huða æþelingas ellen  
glory heard, how the leaders courage  
fremedon. Oft scyld scefing sceaþena  
accomplished. Often Scyld, Scef's son, from enemies'  
þreatum monegum mægþum meodo-setla  
bands, from many tribes mead-benches  
of-teah egsode eorl syððan ærest weard  
seized, terrorised earl[s], since first he was  
fea-scaft funden he þæs frofre gebad  
destitute found; he its relief knew,  
weox under wolcnum weorð-myndum þah.  
grew under skies, in honours thrive,  
oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymb-sittendra  
until to him each of the neighbours  
ofer hron-rade hyran scolde gomban  
over whale-road submit must, tribute  
gyldan þæt wæs god cyning. ðæm eafera wæs  
yield; that was good king! To him heir was  
æfter cenned geong in geardum þone god  
after born young in dwellings, him God  
sende folce to frofre fyren-ðearfe on-  
sent to folk for solace; intense misery  
gear þ hie ær drugon aldor-[le]asc. lange  
saw when they before felt leaderless a long  
hwile him þæs lif-frea wuldres wealdend  
while; to them for it Life-Lord, glory's Ruler  
worold-are for-geaf. beowulf wæs brene  
world honour gave, Beow was famed,  
blæd wide sprang scyldes eafera scede-  
renown widely sprang of Scyld's heir Danish  
landum in. Swa sceal [geong g]uma gode  
lands in. So shall young man by good [deeds]  
ge-wyrcean fromum feoh-giftum. on fæder  
ensure, by fine fee-gifts in father's ...

# Beowulf – in a translation by Seamus Heaney (1999)

The current page is a transcription of the opening of Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* which was actually commissioned by the US publisher Norton in 1980 and issued separately by Faber in 1999 before inclusion in the 5<sup>th</sup> Edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Poetry* (2005).

The present copy can be found online at <https://classroom.kleinisd.net/> ... Note that the transcription of the second line is faulty where the phrase "in days done by" appears in place of Heaney's more natural phrase "in days gone by".

*For some reason, Heaney's "Beowulf" has been made the target of numerous internet thefts - perhaps because of its status as the English national epic – a status which Heaney's Irish provenance complexifies in interesting ways. Next we shall see a near perfect version of the Norton text – apparently using the publisher's sheets ...*

## From Beowulf: A New Verse Translation by Seamus Heaney

### *Introduction of the Danes*

So. The Spear-Danes in days done by  
And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.  
We have heard of those prince's heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,  
A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.  
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.  
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on  
As his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

In the end each clan on the outlying coats  
Beyond the whale-road had to yield to him                    10  
And begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,  
A cub in the yard, a comfort sent  
By God to that nation. He knew what they had **tholed\***,  
The long times and troubles they'd come through  
Without a leader; so the Lord of Life,  
The glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.  
Shield had fathered a famous son:  
Beow's name was known through the north  
and a young prince must be prudent like that,                    20  
Giving freely while his father lives  
so that afterwards in age when fighting starts  
steadfast companions will stand by him  
and hold the line. Behaviour that's admired  
is the path to power among people everywhere.                    *\*tholed- suffered*

Shield was still thriving when his time came  
and crossed over into the Lord's Keeping.  
His warrior band did what he bade them  
when he laid down the law among the Danes:  
they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,                    30  
the chief they revered who had long ruled them.  
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbor,  
Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.  
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,  
Laid out by the mast, amidships,  
the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures  
were piled upon him, and precious gear.  
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished  
With battle tackle, bladed weapons  
And coats of mail. The massed treasure                    40  
was loaded on top of him: it would travel far  
on out into the ocean's sway.  
They decked his body no less bountifully  
With offerings than those first ones did  
Who cast him away when he was a child  
And launched him alone out over the waves.  
And they set a gold standard up  
High above his head and let him drift  
To wind and tide, bewailing him  
And mourning their loss. No man can tell,                    50  
No wise man in hall or weathered veteran  
Knows for certain who salvaged that load.

# Heaney's *Beowulf* – The Norton Bilingual Translation (2000).

... swanrad l.200, beadoleoma l.1523, l.woruldcandel l.1965, goldwine l.1171, banhus l. 2508 ...

In this early passage of Heaney's translation, we have highlighted "word-choard"- and example of the poetic device known as a *kenning* - that is, a "descriptive compound" much found widely which forms the most pervasive feature of the Nordic Poetic Tradition, - according to J. R. R. Tolkien.

It has been calculated that one-third of the noun phrases in *Beowulf* are kennings. These were originally necessitated by the search for alliterative terms to make up verses which normally involve three or more such words beginning with the same consonant – e.g., *werodes wisa*, *word-hord onlēac* (l.258.) Here 'word-hord' added to 'wisa' [wiseman/leader] supplies three 'w' sounds in a single line.

In every kenning the identity of a given substantive is embedded in a two-part epithet which functions as a condensed riddle that reflects an original, yet practical, way of looking at the thing in question. In time, however, kennings turn into clichés as the perennial *ring-giver* (for 'generous prince') inevitably did and the kenning ceased to be used in *Nordic Poetry* after the 1200s.

Kennings enjoyed an unexpected revival in the short-stories of Jorge Luis Borges' collection *Labyrinths* (1962). For this writer – sometimes called the father of Magic Realism – a kenning is an "enigmatic circumlocution", according to an essay in a much earlier collection (*History of Eternity*, 1935).

ende-sæta, æg-wearde hēold,  
þē on land Dena lādra nānig  
mid scip-herge sceðþan ne meahte.  
Nō hēr cūðlicor cuman ongunnon  
lind-hæbbende; nē gē lēafnes-word  
gūð-fremmendra gearwe ne wisson,  
māga gemēdu. Nāfre ic mārān geseah  
eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is ēower sum,  
secg on searwum; nis þæt seld-guma,  
250 wāpnūm geweorðad; nāfre him his wite lēoge,  
ænlic ansyn. Nū ic ēower sceal  
frum-cyn witan, ær gē fyr heonan  
lēas-sceāweras on land Dena  
furþur fēran. Nū gē feor-būend,  
mere-līðende, mīnne gehyrað  
ānfealdne geþōht; ofost is sēlest  
tō gecyðanne hwanan ēowre cyme syndon."  
Him se yldesta andswarode,  
werodes wisa, word-hord onlēac:  
260 "Wē synt gum-cynnes Gēata lēode  
ond Higelāces heorð-genēatas;  
wæs mīn fæder folcum gecyþed,  
æþele ord-fruma Ecgþeow hāten,—  
gebād wintra worn, ær hē on weg hwurfe,  
gamol of geardum; hine gearwe geman  
witena wēl-hwylc wīde geond eorþan.  
Wē þurh holdne hige hlāford þinne,  
sunu Healfdenes, sēcean cwōmon,  
lēod-gebyrgean; wes þū ūs lārena gōd!  
270 Habbað wē tō þām mārān micel ārende,  
Deniga frēan; ne sceal þær dyrne sum  
wesan, þæs ic wēne. Þū wāst—gif hit is,

as lookout on this coast for a long time.  
My job is to watch the waves for raiders,  
any danger to the Danish shore.  
Never before has a force under arms  
disembarked so openly—not bothering to ask  
if the sentries allowed them safe passage  
or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen  
a mightier man-at-arms on this earth  
than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,  
250 he is truly noble. This is no mere  
hanger-on in a hero's armour.  
So now, before you fare inland  
as interlopers, I have to be informed  
about who you are and where you hail from.  
Outsiders from across the water,  
I say it again: the sooner you tell  
where you come from and why, the better."

The leader of the troop unlocked his **word-choard**;  
the distinguished one delivered this answer:  
260 "We belong by birth to the Geat people  
and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.  
In his day, my father was a famous man,  
a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.  
He outlasted many a long winter  
and went on his way. All over the world  
men wise in counsel continue to remember him.  
We come in good faith to find your lord  
and nation's shield, the son of Halfdane.  
Give us the right advice and direction.  
270 We have arrived here on a great errand  
to the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore  
there should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.

The Geat hero  
announces himself  
and explains his  
mission

# Beowulf: The Interpreters – 1: Friedrich Klaeber

Friedrich Klaeber (1863-1954), a Prussian-born philologist, worked at Minnesota University from 1893 to 1931, after which he returned to Europe. His Berlin home was destroyed during the war and he is buried in his wife's town of Bad Kösen in what was then West Germany (GDR). The scholarship of his edition, first published in America 1922 and entitled *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, remained the standard guide for more than 50 years. Klaeber sets out his interpretation under distinct headings which reflect his conception of the poem as a Christian redaction of a pagan legend, actually based on the history of a Swedish dynasty whose dynastic feuds he treated as the underlying and governing theme of the poem, later coloured by conventional Christian sentiments in a monastic scribal redaction.

## The Historical Elements

How much of historical truth there is in the subjects considered under this heading cannot be made out with certainty. The early-Germanic poetry of heroic legend, though inspired by stirring events of the times, primarily those of the great period of tribal migrations, was anything but a record and mirror of historical happenings. *What the singers and hearers delighted in was the warlike ideals of the race, the momentous situations that bring out a man's character; and the poet's imagination eagerly seized upon the facts of history to mould them in accordance with the current standards of the typical hero-life.*

[...] Yet with all due allowance for disintegrating influences, those elements of the *Beowulf* which we naturally class as 'historical,' - i.e. based on history, in contradistinction to the frankly fabulous matter of a preternatural character, have, in a large measure, an air of reality and historical truth about them which is quite remarkable and, in fact, out of the ordinary. (p.xxix.)

[...] Thus the two tragic motives of this epic tradition are *the implacable enmity between two tribes*, dominated by the idea of revenge which no human bonds of affection can restrain, and *the struggle for the crown among members of a royal family* [which is to lead to the extinction of the dynasty] (xxxvi.)

## The Christian Colouring

The presentation of the story-material in *Beowulf* has been influenced, to a considerable extent, by ideas derived from Christianity [yet] the poem abounds, to be sure, in supernatural elements of pre-Christian associations. Heathen practices are mentioned in several places, such as the vowing of sacrifices at idol fanes (175 ff.), the observing of omens (204), the burning of the dead (3137 ff., 1107 ff., 2124 ff.), which was frowned upon by the Church. The frequent allusions to the power of fate (wyr, cf. Angl. xxxvi 171 f.), the motive of blood revenge (1384 f., cp. 1669 f., 1256, 1278, 1546 f.), the praise of worldly glory (1387 ff., cp. 2804 ff., 884 f., 954 f.) bear testimony to an ancient background of pagan conceptions and ideals. On the other hand, we hear nothing of angels, saints, relics, of Christ and the cross, of divine worship, church observances, or any particular dogmatic points. Still, *the general impression we obtain from the reading of the poem is certainly the opposite of pagan barbarism.* We almost seem to move in normal Christian surroundings, God's governance of the world and of every human being, the evil of sin, the doings of the devil, the last judgment, heaven and hell are ever and anon referred to as familiar topics. [...] Of specific motives derived from the Old Testament (and occurring in Genesis also) we note the story of Cain, the giants, and the deluge (107 ff., 1261 ff., 1689 ff.), and the song of Creation (92 ff.).



# Beowulf: The Interpreters – 2: W. P. Ker

William Paton Ker (1855-1904), a Scottish literary historian and prolific writer who worked variously in Oxford, Cardiff (Wales), and London University before taking the chair of Poetry in Oxford. His great work *The Dark Ages* (1904), a synopsis of medieval literature, was a touchstone for English readers including the poet W. H. Auden who regarded it as a turning-point in his own imaginative life in view of Ker's depiction of by-gone literature as a 'kind of All Souls' Night' – according to Auden – 'in which the dead, the living and the unborn writers of every age and tongue were seen as engaged upon a common, noble and civilizing task.' ( "Making, Knowing, and Judging", in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, 1962, p. 42.) Ker admired the spirit of Beowulf but condemned its structure.

The English epic is possibly due to Virgil and Statius; possibly to Juvencus and other Christian poets, to the authors studied by Aldhelm and Bede. It may be that *Hildebrand* for the Western Germanic group, that the *Atlamal* for the North, fixes the limit of epic size in the old Teutonic school; that it was difficult or impossible to get beyond this without the encouragement of Latin poets, showing how to amplify and embroider, to compose orations for combatants, and to discriminate the particulars of their wounds.

Yet while there may be about the Anglo-Saxon epic this suspicion of foreign and learned influence, the Anglo-Saxon, or rather the West German type, was capable of growth, for all its slowness, as the Norse type of poetic story was not, for all its energy and curiosity. The old-fashioned poem of *Hildebrand* is so constructed as to leave room for expansion; the loose jointing, the want of restriction in the form, might easily tempt a poet to the fuller mode of treatment found in *Waldere*.

A reasonable view of the merit of *Beowulf* is not impossible, though rash enthusiasm may have made too much of it, while a correct and sober taste may have too contemptuously refused to attend to Grendel or the Firedrake. The fault of *Beowulf* is that there is nothing much in the story. The hero is occupied in killing monsters, like Hercules or Theseus. But there are other things in the lives of Hercules and Theseus besides the killing of the Hydra or of Procrustes. Beowulf has nothing else to do, when he has killed Grendel and Grendel's mother in

Denmark: he goes home to his own Gautland, until at last the rolling years bring the Firedrake and his last adventure. It is too simple. Yet the three chief episodes are well wrought and well diversified; they are not repetitions, exactly; there is a change of temper between the wrestling with Grendel in the night at Heorot and the descent under water to encounter Grendel's mother; while the sentiment of the Dragon is different again. But the great beauty, the real value, of *Beowulf* is in its dignity of style. In construction it is curiously weak, in a sense preposterous; for while the main story is simplicity itself, the merest commonplace of heroic legend, all about it, in the historic allusions, there are revelations of a whole world of tragedy, plots different in import from that of *Beowulf*, more like the tragic themes of Iceland. Yet with this radical defect, a disproportion that puts the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the outer edges, the poem of *Beowulf* is unmistakably heroic and weighty. The thing itself is cheap; the moral and the spirit of it can only be matched among the noblest authors. It is not in the operations against Grendel, but in the humanities of the more leisurely interludes, the conversation of Beowulf and Hrothgar, and such things, that the poet truly asserts his power. It has often been pointed out how like the circumstances are in the welcome of Beowulf at Heorot and the reception of Ulysses in Phæacia. Hrothgar and his queen are not less gentle than Alcinous and Arete. There is nothing to compare with them in the Norse poems: it is not till

“The fault of Beowulf is that there is nothing much in the story. The hero is occupied with killing monsters, like Hercules or Theseus. But there are other things in the lives of Hercules and Theseus besides the killing of the Hydra or of Procrustes. Beowulf has nothing else to do, when he had killed Grendel and Grendel's mother in Denmark: he goes home to his own Gautland, until at last the rolling years bring the Fire-drake and his last adventure. It is too simple.

“[...] Yet even with this radical defect - a disproportion that puts the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the outer edges - the poem of Beowulf is undeniably weighty. The thing itself is cheap; the moral and the spirit of it can only be matched among the noblest authors.”

(Ker, *The Dark Ages*, NY: Charles Scribner & Sons 1904, pp.252-53.) [Available at Internet Archive - <https://archive.org/details/cu31924027096134>.

# Beowulf: The Interpreters – 3: J. R. R. Tolkien

For J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), both Klaeber's view and Ker's – whom he quoted extensively - were marred by the failure to appreciate the *poetic* or *imaginative* nature of the work, that is, the changes the simple plot underwent in the mind of the poet. It was Tolkien, in fact, who brought Beowulf back from the domain of the historians and archaeologists – and gave it back to the common reader (albeit in translation!) This, writing in his 1936 lecture on "Beowulf and the Monsters", he took both to task in arguing that the poet infused the received narrative of Beowulf and Grendel with a more intense and higher order of meaning than its folklore original.

## "Beowulf and the Monsters" (1936)

So far from being a poem so poor that only its accidental historical interest can still recommend it, *Beowulf is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content*, and is largely independent even of the most important facts (such as the date and identity of Hygelac) that research has discovered. (p.105.)

The poem 'lacks steady advance': so Klaeber heads a critical section in his edition. But *the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings*. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. [...] This simple and static structure, solid and strong, is in each part much diversified, and capable of enduring this treatment.

[...T]he serious weakness, or apparent weakness, is the long recapitulation: the report of Beowulf to Hygelac. [...]the explanation, if not complete justification, is probably to be sought in different directions. For one thing, the old tale was not first told or invented by this poet. [...] *The plot was not the poet's; and though he has infused feeling and significance into its crude material, that plot was not a perfect vehicle of the theme and themes that came to hidden life in the poet's mind as he worked upon it.* (in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1936. pp.124-25.)

Tolkien considers the poet to have rescued from pagan tradition and reimagined as a Christian poem in which the idea of endurance (or courage) is given the value of a Christian virtue, suggesting that the Anglo-Saxon poet has triumphed over the puritanical spirit of continental Christian missionaries who would prefer to see all paganism banished.

# J. R. R. Tolkien and 'the theory of courage'

“Beowulf and the Monsters” (1936) – cont.

One of the most potent elements in that fusion [pagan and Christian] is [the Northern courage, the theory of courage, which is the great contribution of early Northern literature](#). This is not a military judgement. ... I refer rather to the central position the [creed of unyielding will](#) holds in the North. With this reserve we may turn to the tradition of pagan imagination as it survived in Icelandic [literature]. Of English pre-Christian mythology we know practically nothing.

But the fundamentally similar heroic temper of ancient England and Scandanavia cannot have been founded on (or perhaps rather, cannot have generated) mythological divergent on this essential point. ... [In \[their\] vision of the final defeat of the humane \(and of the divine made in its image\), and in the essential hostility of the gods and heros on the one hand and the monsters on the other, we may suppose that pagan English and Norse imagination agreed.](#)

But in England this imagination was brought into touch with Christendom, and with the Scriptures. [...] (p.117.)

Almost we might say that this poem was (in one direction) inspire by the debate that had long been held and continued after, and that it was one of the chief contributions to the controversy: [shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition?](#) What good will it do posterity to read the battles of Hector? *Quid Hinieldus cum Christi?* [Alcuin.] The author of Beowulf showed forth the permanent value of [that pietas which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned.](#)

[It would seem to have been a part of the English temper](#) in its strong sense of tradition, dependent doubtless on dynasties, noble houses, and their code of honour, and strengthened, it may be, by the more inquisitive and less severe Celtic learning, [that it should](#), at least in some quarters and despite grave and Gallic voices, [preserve much from the northern past to blend with southern learning, and new faith.](#) (p.120.)

# Heaney on *Beowulf*

Seamus Heaney's interpretation of *Beowulf* was conditioned by his own character as an Irish poet – in fact, the greatest Irish poet since W. B. Yeats (whose 'phantasmagoria' he mentions in his essay), and winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature. Among Yeats's chief works are poems and plays about a comparable ancient Irish hero called Cuchulain [Koo-kull-in] – the chief heroic character in the 7<sup>th</sup> century *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, or *Cattle-raid of Cooley*.

However, when it comes to considering *Beowulf* as a work of literature, there is one publication that stands out. In 1936, the Oxford scholar and teacher J.R.R. Tolkien published an epoch-making paper entitled "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" which took for granted the poem's integrity and distinction as a work of art and proceeded to show in what this integrity and distinction inhered. He assumed that the poet had felt his way through the inherited material—the fabulous elements and the traditional accounts of an heroic past—and by a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring had arrived at a unity of effect and a balanced order. He assumed, in other words, that the *Beowulf* poet was an imaginative writer rather than some kind of back-formation derived from nineteenth-century folklore and philology. Tolkien's brilliant literary treatment changed the way the poem was valued and initiated a new era—and new terms—of appreciation.

Introduction to *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*  
(London: Faber & Faber 1999; NY: Norton 2000), p.xi

Heaney finds in Tolkien a willingness to see in the poet who wrote *Beowulf* "a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring" which marked that poet as "an imaginative writer rather than some kind of back-formation derived from nineteenth-century folklore and philology."

Tolkien's vision of the *Beowulf* poet as an "imaginative" artist was particularly suited to Heaney as an Irish poet who inherited a tradition in which the ancient legacy of Gaelic culture – lost through long centuries of English occupation but retrieved to scholarship by 19<sup>th</sup> century philologists and folklorists and finally infused with new imaginative life (and political dynamism) by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century "Revival" of which W. B. Yeats was the most important moving spirit.

Hence Heaney was prepared by his own national experience to see *Beowulf* as a poem with the same kind of imaginative vitality as the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, Ireland's epic of tribal warfare which, though very different from *Beowulf* in temper, is clearly the product of an ancient martial society which revered feats of arms above all else – though not without regard for powerful women.



The Death of Cuchulain  
by Oliver Sheppard (1923)

# Heaney on *Beowulf*

*The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.  
He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared  
his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,  
unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.  
His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain. (ll. 2415–21)*

Here the poet attains a level of insight that approaches the visionary. The subjective and the inevitable are in perfect balance, what is solidly established is bathed in an element which is completely sixth-sensed, and indeed the whole slow-motion, constantly self-deferring approach to the hero's death and funeral continues to be like this. *Beowulf's* soul may not yet have fled "to its destined place among the steadfast ones," but there is already a beyond-the-grave aspect to him, a revenant quality about his resoluteness. This is not just metrical narrative full of anthropological interest and typical heroic-age motifs; it is poetry of a high order, in which passages of great lyric intensity—such as the "Lay of the Last Survivor" (ll. 2247–66) and, even more remarkably, the so-called "Father's Lament" (ll. 2444–62)—rise like emanations from some fissure in the bedrock of the human capacity to endure:

*It was like the misery felt by an old man  
who has lived to see his son's body  
swing on the gallows. He begins to keen  
and weep for his boy, watching the raven  
gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help.*

.....  
*Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed  
and sings a lament; everything seems too large,  
the steadings and the fields.*

Such passages mark an ultimate stage in poetic attainment; they are the imaginative equivalent of *Beowulf's* spiritual state at the end, when he tells his men that "doom of battle will bear [their] lord away," in the same way that the sea-journeys so vividly described in lines 210–28 and 1903–24 are the equivalent of his exultant prime.

At these moments of lyric intensity, the keel of the poetry is deeply set in the element of sensation while the mind's lookout sways metrically and far-sightedly in the element of pure comprehension. Which is to say that the elevation of *Beowulf* is always, paradoxically, buoyantly down to earth. And nowhere is this more obviously and memorably the case than in the account of the hero's funeral with which the poem ends. Here the inexorable and the elegiac combine in a description of the funeral pyre being got ready, the body being burnt, and the barrow being constructed—a scene at once immemorial and oddly contemporary. The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo; her keen is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to a comfortless future. We immediately recognize her predicament and the pitch of her grief and find ourselves the better for having them expressed with such adequacy and dignity and unforgiving truth:

Introduction to *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (2000), p.xx-xxi.



Bellaghy Bawn at Heaney's birthplace in Northern Ireland.

Heaney holds that *Beowulf* is not just "anthropology" but "poetry of a high order" and that the "lyric intensity" of the best passages reveals the work of a poet whose mind was elevated by an "element of pure comprehension" while remaining "buoyantly down to earth" in the world of real experience.

In citing the experience of people in Rwanda and Kosovo nearer our own time who have "survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are exposed to a comfortless future", he may mean to imply the historical experience of his own people in Ireland who experienced long centuries of colonial oppression.

One relic of that oppression is the bawn, or fortified house – typically painted white – at Ballaghy where he was born and grew up. In his translation of the poem, he uses the Hiberno-English word "bawn", which is not known to English readers, as a synonym for Hrothgar's mead-hall. Similarly, he uses the Ulster Irish word *thole*, meaning suffering, which is no longer used in English.

# The English & the Vikings: Fighting for their lives

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,  
mod sceal þe mare þe ure mægen lytlað.*

*Courage the harder, heart the stronger,  
spirit the greater as our strength declines.*

The Battle of Maldon was fought between the English and the Vikings on a narrow peninsula at Northey in Essex on 10<sup>th</sup> August 991 a.d. After the English general Byrhtnoth had been killed, an old Anglo-Saxon warrior called Byrhtwold spoke the memorable words recorded in the poem of that name: *'Our courage will be fiercer, our hearts bolder, and our spirit greater as our strength declines.'* Traditionally this has been taken as an expression of the 'theory of courage' among the Nordic people about which JRR Tolkien has written in his essay of *Beowulf*. In the aftermath of the battle, the English agreed to pay a tax – or 'danegeld' – of £10,000 a year to the Vikings. The Anglo-Saxon king of that period is known as "Aethelred the Unready."



Maldon on the River  
Blackwater in Essex (S.W.  
England)



The sole manuscript copy of "The Battle of Maldon" – an epic account of the defeat of the English by the Vikings in 991 was bound into codex called Otho A xii which was destroyed by fire in the Cotton Library at Oxford in 1731. A partial copy known as the Elphinstone Transcription – named after the librarian who made it – survived and is now held in the British Library (London).

## THE BATTLE OF MALDON

Byrhtwold mæpelode, bord hafenode—  
se pæs eald gencat—æsc acpehte;  
he ful baldlice beornas lærde:  
'Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,  
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.  
Her lið ure ealdor eall forheapen,  
god on greote. A mæg gnornian  
se ðe nu fram þis pizplegan pendan þenceð.  
Ic eom frod feores. Fram ic ne pille,  
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,  
be spa leofan men licgan þence.'  
Spa hi Æþelgares bearn ealle bylde  
Godric to zube. Oft he gar forlet,  
pælspere pindan on þa picingas;  
spa he on þam folce fyrmost code,  
heop 7 hynde, oð þæt he on hilde gecranc.

*Byrhtwold spoke; he grasped his shield—  
he was an old follower—he shook the ash spear;  
very boldly he exhorted the warriors:  
'Courage shall be the fiercer, heart the bolder,  
spirit the greater, as our strength lessens.  
Here lies our chief all hewn down,  
a noble man in the dust. He has cause ever to mourn  
who intends now to turn from this war-play.  
I am advanced in years. I will not hence,  
but I by the side of my lord,  
by so dear a man, intend to lie.'  
Likewise, Godric, the son of Æthelgar, exhorted them all  
to the battle. Often he let the spear fly,  
the deadly spear speed away among the Vikings;  
as he went out in the forefront of the army,  
he hewed and struck, until he perished in the battle.*

# 1066: The defeat of the Vikings & the Norman Invasion

**Alfred the Great of Wessex** (849-899) is considered the most important figure in Anglo-Saxon history, famed for his personal learning and his support of religious and educational institutions. He also raised the army and created the navy with which the Anglo-Saxons successfully contained Viking power in England, confining it to the north of the country where the Vikings imposed their **Danelaw** - a harsh system of taxation (**danegeld**). After Alfred's death, **King Aethelred of Mercia** (who was married to Alfred's daughter) decisively vanquished Vikings at the Battle of Brunanbruh of 937. This victory brought an end to Danelaw in England but the Danes and Norse continued to raid the country whenever they could muster the ships and men to do so.



In 1013, King Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark invaded with a large army causing Æthelred to flee to Normandy. Just a year later he returned to claimed the throne. Then, in 1016, the new Danish king Cnut defeated the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Assandun and formed the joint kingdom of England and Denmark ruled by him. At this point the Viking realm had reached its widest extent. Cnut's son Harthacut inherited the English throne after his death in 1035. Thirty years later, in September 1066, King Harold Godwinson of Wessex successfully led an Anglo-Saxon army to a great victory over the Danes at the Battle of Stamford Bridge and that ended Viking power in England for good.



The story of the Norman Conquest is recorded in the Bayeux Tapestry, woven in soon after Battle of Hastings.



Centenary statue of Alfred by Hamo Thornycroft, 1899.

Only a month later, however, the Anglo-Saxon world was faced with sudden extinction when England was invaded by Duke William II of Normandy – otherwise William the Conqueror. William destroyed Harold's army and killed the king himself at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066. Under William and his successors a feudal Britain began to emerge in which a Norman aristocracy and English institutions were fused together, with the English language as the dominant means of communication. It was presumably the strength of the existing English institutions which ensured that this happened yet English rapidly underwent changes as to its conjugations and declensions which marked it as the relatively grammar-free language that it is today. Why this happened remains uncertain: perhaps the 'practical' English temperament?

# The spirit of Maldon?

## Curious Questions

- Is there such a thing as a national literature? Can it include pre-modern sources (indigenous, &c.)?
- Is a sense of nationality transmitted by family, society, history, culture, religion or political ideology?
- Is there an essential form of nationhood (e.g., *Englishness*, *Frenchness*, *Brazilian-ness*)?
- Do we learn anything *about* the mentality of a given nation by studying “its” literature?
- Do we learn anything *from* the mentality of a given ‘nation’ by studying “its” culture?
- Should the study of nationality be developed or repressed? Encouraged or policed? (EU v. Brexit)
- Are the *Beowulf* poet, the *Maldon* poet, William Shakespeare and Winston Churchill significantly related in terms of national identity?
- .....



# Literary Nationalism: Henry V's "St. Crispin's Day Speech (Shakespeare)

*"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers ..."*



*Arrows from the English longbows destroyed French chivalry at Agincourt.*

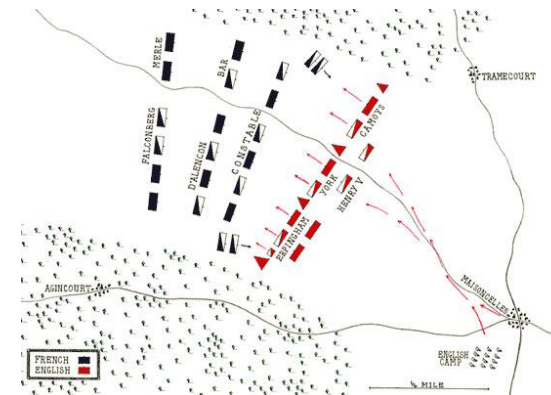
## THE BATTLE OF AGINCOURT, 1415

Facing a larger French army, Lord Westmoreland wishes that 'ten thousand of those men in England / That do no work to-day' were here to fight them – to which King Henry replies:

KING. What's he that wishes so?  
My cousin, Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin;  
If we are mark'd to die, we are enow  
To do our country loss; and if to live,  
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.  
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.  
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,  
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;  
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.  
But if it be a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive.  
No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.  
God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour  
As one man more methinks would share from me  
For the best hope I have. *O, do not wish one more!*  
*Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,*  
*That he which hath no stomach to this fight,*  
*Let him depart; his passport shall be made,*  
*And crowns for convoy put into his purse;*  
*We would not die in that man's company*  
*That fears his fellowship to die with us.*  
This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.  
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,  
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,  
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.  
He that shall live this day, and see old age,  
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,  
And say "To-morrow is Saint Crispian."  
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,  
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."  
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,  
But he'll remember, with advantages,

What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,  
Familiar in his mouth as household words—  
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,  
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester—  
Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'ed.  
This story shall the good man teach his son;  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remembered—  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition;  
And gentlemen in England now a-bed  
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

*Henry V, Act IV Scene iii, 18–67.*



# Literary Nationalism: Churchill's "Fight them on the Beaches" speech



Sir Winston Churchill, war-time  
Prime Minister of Britain (1939-45)



Dunkirk 1940 and  
Normandy 1944.

*"We few, we happy few, we band of  
brothers ..."* (Henry V, Pt. II.

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail.

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France,  
we shall fight on the seas and oceans,  
we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island,  
whatever the cost may be,  
we shall fight on the beaches,  
we shall fight on the landing grounds,  
we shall fight in the fields and in the streets,  
we shall fight in the hills;  
we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part  
of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the  
British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power  
and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old."

*4<sup>th</sup> June 1940*

Speaking to the nation on radio at a time when the British Army had just been forced off the continental mainland by Hitler's Panzer divisions, Sir Winston Churchill echoed the language of Shakespeare's *Henry V* in calling for resistance.

He incidentally invokes another regal Shakespearean speech when he talks of "our Island" – an echo of Richard II's line, "This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle, This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars ... This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" – a line he can be sure his audience will know.

Less acceptable to our ears is the reference to "our empire" - but he also speaks of his hope and expectation that the 'New World' will join the war to settle the score with Germany – as indeed did on 11 December 1940, four days after Pearl Harbour.

# Beowulf: The Comic



Beowulf was successfully filmed by Robert Zemeckis in 2007 with Ray Winstone as Beowulf, Anthony Hopkins as Hrothgar and Angelina Jolie as Grendel's mother. John Malovich and Robert Penn Wright also got in on the act. It grossed \$190 million in the USA at a cost of £150 million and has retained its place as a maybe-classic.

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in gear-dagum  
þeod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,  
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by  
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.  
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.