

Nobel-winning poet Seamus Heaney took on a task he described as “trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer” --and succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. In his award-winning translation of the oft-maligned Old English epic *Beowulf*, he skips effortlessly over the many difficulties of text, language, history, and culture to present us with a fact commonly forgotten: *Beowulf* is a good poem. There is no need to read it only as an historical document, or as a linguistic artifact, and certainly not as a dull high school English assignment to be waded through and forgotten. Because *Beowulf*, brought to new life in Heaney’s translation, is good. All by itself.

The task of reviving the *Beowulf* text could not have fallen into more capable hands. In Heaney’s intelligent introduction, he defends his conviction that “what we are dealing with is a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece where the structuring of the tale is as elaborate as the beautiful contrivances of its language.” For many readers new to the text, Heaney’s fluid and beautiful way with words proves that “[the poem’s] narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in present time.”

Beowulf’s continuing vitality as a work of art depends on two different elements of the poem: first, on its very gruesome and gripping depictions of the most primal human emotions; second, on its sensitive and intelligent reflection on the universal problems of loyalty, pride, defeat, and mortality. Heaney manages to fully explore Beowulf the man and Beowulf the superhero without sacrificing the integrity of the one for the excitement of the other.

Perhaps the easiest way to “dust off” *Beowulf* for a contemporary, youthful audience is to accentuate its almost comic book aspect of adventure and gore. Heaney sticks close to the original here, and doesn’t shy away from the gruesome aspects of battle. His blood-and-guts approach does more than just jazz up an old text. It takes fantastic, mythical monsters and brings them out of the realm of dreams and into real, visceral, terrifying life. The freshness of the language captures the real, flesh-and-blood evil of Grendel and his mother. Without a sense that these characters are true threats (and not merely cartoon foes) the awesomeness of Beowulf’s courage is lost on the reader.

Still, Heaney never reduces the tale to a series of gory match-ups. Instead, he uses each encounter to capture the Beowulf-poet’s timeless view of duty and courage. Nor does Heaney downplay the equally daunting—and courageous—tasks of assuming the kingship during turbulent times, of forging ties of friendship with a feuding nation, and at last, of facing his own human vulnerability.

Action stories and comic books that depict a man in his struggle with a demon, a dragon, or some other mythical monster are often reductive and one-dimensional. A title character seems to appear out of nowhere to rise to battle and then disappears again, without character or history. No idea could be farther from the truth of *Beowulf*, which adds a hundred human valences of fear, courage, nobility, and doubt to its hero. Moreover, every other character in the poem—for the poem abounds with characters above and beyond its heroes and its monsters—is given the same sort of full, careful treatment.

Despite its seeming preoccupation with the otherworldly, the poem is imminently human. Perhaps Heaney’s greatest accomplishment is in bringing the human aspects to the forefront, so that a passage like “Father’s Lament” becomes part of a carefully nuanced pattern of translation instead of a sort of lyric interruption:

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.

Beowulf's chief triumph is in the individual—in an individual's need for perseverance and fortitude to live out his singular fate. But Heaney never emphasizes this to the exclusion of the political, for in *Beowulf*, as now, the personal and political are intricately tied. The fortunes of Beowulf are quite literally the fortunes of his nation, for he is their leader and the last great man of their race. Therefore, the feuds, the treacheries, and the cowardice in this poem serve as a backdrop to Beowulf's peacemaking and leadership. In a society tightly bound by ties of personal loyalty, every warrior must carry an immense political weight on his shoulders—and where Beowulf succeeds, many others fail. The funeral that ends the epic brings to a close not only Beowulf's life, but the preeminence of his entire race:

On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core.

The immensity of grief here is made only more poignant by the stark simplicity of the lines and the indifferent cruelty of the blaze. The poem's dignity lies in its keen awareness of suffering and its unflinching commitment to endurance. The looming sense of mortality that colors the entire poem is neither self-pitying nor carelessly unaware. Instead, Beowulf prepares to face the vagaries of fate and the certainty of death with wisdom and courage, a man who "held to his high destiny."