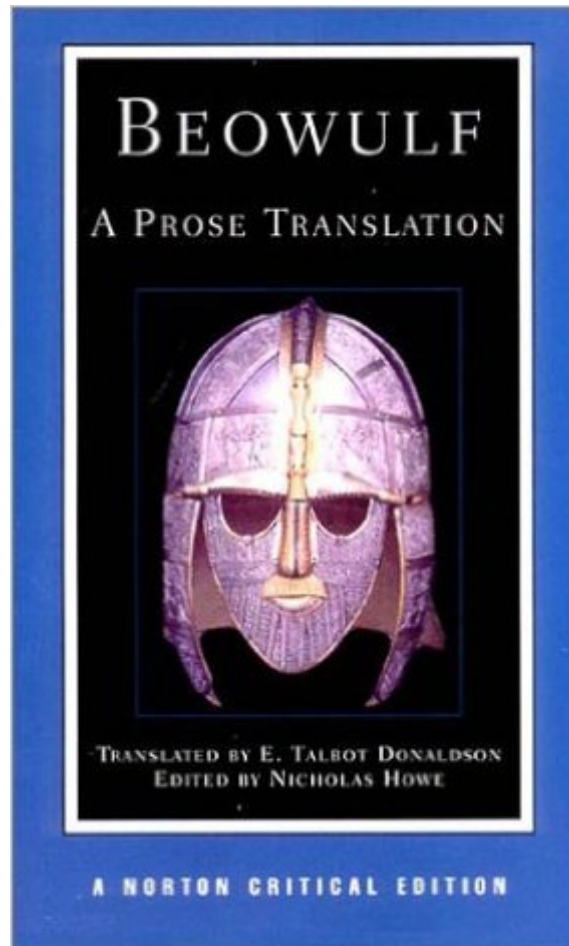


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# Beowulf: A Prose Translation (Second Edition) (Norton Critical Editions)



## Synopsis

The text of this edition of Beowulf is based on the highly regarded Donaldson prose translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem. Accurate and literally faithful, the Donaldson translation conveys the full meaning and spirit of the original. "Backgrounds and Contexts" provides readers with the historical, linguistic, and literary settings of Beowulf, including Robert C. Hughes on the origins of the Old English language, E. Talbot Donaldson's presentation of the major features of Old English poetry, new material on Beowulf's tribes and genealogies, three maps, and a facsimile illustration of the manuscript. "Criticism" collects seven new and wide-ranging interpretations of Beowulf by Fred C. Robinson, Roberta Frank, John D. Niles, Michael Lapidge, Joyce Hill, Helen Bennett, and Nicholas Howe. A Glossary of Proper Names and a Selected Bibliography are included. Maps and illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I am a dissenter from the hype surrounding Seamus Heaney's new translation. I prefer Donaldson for two important reasons: the transparency of the translation and the translator's humble willingness to let stand archaic implications that may seem absurd or offensive to most people today. On a technical level, Donaldson--much more consistently than Heaney--reproduces Old English compounded words and phrases with Modern equivalents. He does this with accuracy and freshness--if not with seamless grace as some readers would prefer. The great advantage of

Donaldson's approach is that the reader who does not read OE can at least imagine that she can second-guess the translator, and can feel the raw, rugged texture of the original. Even my 12th grade (inner city high school) students who have bought Heaney's version have become irate at a number of crucial points where the complexity preserved by Donaldson has been eliminated by Heaney. A second point--or a second way of looking at the same point--concerns interpretation. With all due respect to Heaney, he has an agenda related to the future of the European Union, and I suspect that this motivated or influenced his approach to the translation of Beowulf. Heaney is presenting, via the seminal text of Beowulf, a vision of the origins of European politics that he believes will ultimately lay a foundation for its future viability and humanity. Heaney's version is this a much more creative endeavor than was Donaldson's. Where Donaldson allows seeming incoherencies to emerge for the modern reader, Heaney makes things make sense. The main difference here lies in the treatment of the hero. For Heaney, Beowulf is an unambiguous ideal figure. Donaldson, on the other hand, preserves the original ambiguity of a hero who is physically similar to the monsters he fights in his superiority to ordinary men. Yes, Jacques, there's no translation without interpretation, but there's also a question of degree of control to consider. Heaney's translation falls in line with the unfortunate tradition of Raffel, whose Procrustean approach privileged modern sensibility above everything else. Heaney is much better than Raffel, but Donaldson is one of those rare translations that has and will continue to stand the test of time because he didn't try too hard to be a person of his time.

I am one of those people who, out of pride perhaps, force themselves to read classic old stuff even when it gives me headaches. I was braced for such an experience when I began to read Beowulf. I remembered being completely disinterested when I had to read an excerpt of it in high school. But I was pleasantly surprised. In the first place, Beowulf is short; I was able to read it in an afternoon. Secondly, the translation is very readable and entertaining. A few times I had to read a sentence twice to understand it, but that happens. The translator was definitely a craftsman of the English language. Third, the story is entertaining. It's fun to read. This might not be true of all classic literature! It's an adventure story, and a pleasing one. One reason it was fun to read is that you can feel the pleasures of the heroic values that the poet and his audience shared; in this respect it's similar to what you might experience in "Lord of the Rings." In fact, the story often reminded me of Tolkien--I confidently guarantee that Tolkien fans will enjoy it. (Tolkien also wrote one of the essays included in this edition.) Fourth, it is interesting to read the oldest "English" story (of course our language has evolved so much that we now need a translator). The historical interest is much aided

by the essays in the Norton Critical edition, including very helpful maps of England and ancient Scandinavia. One interesting aspect of Beowulf is the tension between pre-Christian values and Christian ones within the story as we know it. Again, the essays were interesting and enlightening about this as well. All in all, this is classic literature at its best: readable, highly entertaining, and educational (and short). The essays and maps really were helpful; you won't need to buy the Cliffs Notes to understand or appreciate the text. If you want to read classic literature, I strongly recommend Beowulf; if you want to read Beowulf, I strongly recommend this edition.

Of the translations that I have read this is the most true to the original words. It is a prose translation, so Donaldson did not need to select words based on their sounds and could get the meaning more accurately. The exactness of the translation makes this language sound archaic. The footnotes are quite helpful, especially when going through the difficult passages at the start of the Dragon story that describe the wars of the Swedish succession. Read this translation and then try a poetic translation such as Heaney's.

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