**BEOWULF**

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*Beowulf* is the most famous and most frequently translated poem in the Anglo-Saxon language (also called Old English); at 3,182 lines it is also by far the longest to have survived. An anonymous work written sometime between the late eighth century and the early eleventh century, *Beowulf* is better known than any other poem before Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1390–1399). For nearly two centuries, this poem has embodied the early Middle Ages for millions of readers. But *Beowulf* is much more than the sum of its exciting narrative parts; the poem’s history is closely connected with the development of the nineteenth-century nation-state, and scores of editions and translations collectively demonstrate its power to arouse controversy and stir deep feeling.

**HISTORY OF THE TEXT**

*Beowulf* exists in a single, imperfect copy in a tenth-century manuscript now in the British Library, London, known as Cotton Vitellius A.xv, and sometimes also as the Nowell Codex after the sixteenth-century scholar Laurence Nowell, who once owned the manuscript. There is no record of anyone’s having read or understood *Beowulf* before 1705, when Humphrey Wanley, an Oxford scholar and librarian, catalogued the manuscript. Wanley described the poem as an account of the conflict between “Beowulf the Dane” and the Swedes. His work drew the attention of Grímur Jónsson Thorkelsson, a Danish archivist and historian (1752–1829), who went to England and sometime in 1786 commissioned a transcription of the poem; later, about 1790, he made another copy himself. The *Beowulf* manuscript had been badly damaged in a fire in 1731, and in the course of the nineteenth century words and letters were lost as its burned edges crumbled. Thorkelsson’s copies are thus the only evidence left for some of this material. In 1815 Thorkelsson published the first edition of *Beowulf*, subtitled *A Danish Poem in Anglo-Saxon Dialect concerning Danish Events of the Third and Fourth Centuries*. Thorkelsson’s edition was accompanied by a Latin translation, since he did not expect even scholars to be able to read the poem in its original language.

Thorkelsson’s edition was ready for the press much earlier than 1815, but it was destroyed when his house burned during the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. This misfortune coincidentally frames the contest between English and Danish scholars for control of the poem. In 1805 the historian Sharon Turner examined Thorkelsson’s transcription of the poem; Turner translated a few passages and included them in his *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, which set the tone for *Beowulf* criticism for a full century or more. “It is the most interesting relic of the Anglo-Saxon poetry which time has spared to us,” he wrote; “and, as a picture of the manners, and as an exhibition of the feelings and notions of those days, it is as valuable as it is ancient.”

*Beowulf* had acquired the status of historical record by the time John Mitchell Kemble published the first English edition of the poem in 1833 (it was revised in 1835, and reissued with translation and commentary in 1837). Kemble thought that *Beowulf* had been written in the middle of the fifth century, the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain. However, in his preface of 1837 Kemble changed his views and now claimed that the poem was “a confused remembering of heathen myth” about an “earlier Beowulf” who was not a historical figure at all but rather a god. Kemble linked Beowulf’s name to twenty-four figures he regarded as comprising “the ancient mythic genealogy of our kings nearly as it was known to our forefathers in the heathen times.” With this bold stroke, Kemble attached the pagan gods of the poem to the backbone of English history.

This brief account of the poem’s history shows that early scholars sought to use *Beowulf* to confirm national identities and recover cultural memory. Throughout the nineteenth century, interest in *Beowulf* continued to grow, spurred partly by the desire to recover early records of national history, partly by growing fascination with folk and national literatures, and partly by philology, which improved the study of medieval languages. In its first
ent by contrast or comparison with a moment from the past.

A burst of *Beowulf* translations marked the millennium, the most famous being that by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Many older translations, including the prose version by E. Talbot Donaldson and the dual-language edition of Howell Chickering, offer better guides to the poem’s language and themes. Heaney’s translation attempts to reshape the poem into a commentary on the history of relations between Ireland and England. Heaney claims in his preface that the poem is “part of his voice-right” and that he was “born into its language . . . and its language was born into me.” Employing deliberately archaic diction, Heaney attempts to reverse the nationalism that colored the early reception of *Beowulf* and to align the poem with a culture oppressed by the British rather than with a culture that contributed to English identity. It is a mark of the poem’s power that, so many years after *Beowulf* first entered the public realm, it should continue to voice conflicts of interest nearly as old as the poem itself.

[See also Seamus Heaney and Old English.]

EDITORIAL AND TRANSLATIONS


FURTHER READING

Bessinger, Jess B., Jr., and Robert F. Yeager, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*. New York, 1984. Useful ideas for approaching the poem for students at all levels.


