



Dan Veach

# Beowulf & Beyond

*Classic Anglo-Saxon Poems,  
Stories, Sayings, Spells, and Riddles*

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## Foreword

What a golden hoard of Anglo-Saxon Dan Veach has delved up for us: prose, riddles, spells, *Beowulf* and more, polishing away the grime of centuries so they shine as though freshly fashioned. I cannot think of a more deeply learned translator who, at the same time, wears his learning so lightly, locating each work with a brief introduction and letting its humanity gleam through. I was especially intrigued to see how he brings women to the fore here, as warriors, peace-weavers, and speakers with their own voices. The modern language is clear and uncluttered, with just enough color, melody, and flavor of old English (“dawn-sorrow”; “summerlong”; “mind full of murder”) to delight the eye, ear, and palate.

— A. E. Stallings

## Preface

This book allows us, like Bede's sparrow, to fly into the fire-lit hall of Anglo-Saxon culture and enjoy the astounding feast set out before us. All the best stories are here, the most magical spells, the most ribald riddles, the most inspired flights of song.

The main course, of course, is *Beowulf*, a great wild boar of a poem whose flavor is like nothing else on earth. As the golden cup is passed around, we sit as close as we can to the music of the ancient poet's harp, the mead-sweet honey of his song.

There's plenty of good English beef here too, some of it bloody. "The Battle of Maldon," one of the world's great war poems, puts us on the front line against the Viking onslaught, surrounded by shouting men, clanging swords and whistling arrows. Women also win their share of honor: Judith is as handy with a sword as Beowulf—maybe more so, as he keeps breaking his!

Their brand of Christianity was no place for cowards either. In "The Dream of the Rood," Christ is a courageous young warrior, eager for his encounter with the cross. They even dared to rewrite Genesis—and make the story better. In their version of *Paradise Lost*, Eve is innocent of any intentional sin. And Satan has a juicy new role—eight hundred years before Milton—as a dark, dramatic antihero, speaking from the depths of his rage and pride.

There is wine for the spirit as well: the vast elegiac vision of "The Wanderer" and the flight of the soul at the end of "The Seafarer," one of the great moments in all of world poetry. This new translation of "The Seafarer" was recently awarded the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize.

For dessert we'll unbutton a bit, and serve up some tidbits you won't find in the textbooks. There are curious sayings and spells, where Christianity and paganism intertwine. And we'll share in a favorite Anglo-Saxon pastime—telling riddles. Let the reader beware: "riddled" with innuendo, some of them would make Freud swallow his cigar!

It's amazing to us that such *risqué* riddles were found in a manuscript written by monks and owned by a bishop. But this is just one more example of the robust, broad-minded, warmly human worldview reflected in *Beowulf* and the other fare set forth here. It's a world we have much to learn from. Enjoy the feast!

## Story of the Sparrow

*flitting swiftly, in through one window and out the other*

In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede recounts the dramatic conversion of the Anglo-Saxon king Edwin to Christianity. While Edwin was considering conversion, a rival king sent an assassin to attack him with a poisoned dagger. Afterwards, Edwin vowed to convert—if the God of the Christians would help him get revenge. No doubt the missionaries explained that this was not quite in the spirit of the thing. Nevertheless, he soon won victory over his rival. Still not convinced, he called his counselors together to discuss the matter. One offered this sage advice:

(The translated passage below, and the poetic “translation” that follows, are by the renowned poet and classical translator A. E. Stallings.)



“Oh king, man’s life on earth—to make a comparison for our uncertain span—seems to me like this: You are feasting with your thanes and your companions in the winter. The hall is warmed by a fire on the hearth, while outside storms of winter rain and snow rage everywhere. Then a sparrow comes flitting swiftly, in through one window and out the other. While inside, it is untouched by the storm, enjoying a brief space of summer skies. But soon, returning from winter into winter, it slips from your sight. Thus, man’s life appears for a just little while. But of what follows, or what came before, we are utterly ignorant. So, if this new religion offers us more certainty, then we should follow it.”

## From the Venerable Bede

by A. E. Stallings

*... adveniensque unus passerum domum citissime  
pervolaverit qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens,  
mox per aliud exierit...*

Like the flight of a sparrow  
Come in from a squall  
Through a hearth-lit hall,  
Fleeting and narrow,  
Our time's but a splinter—  
Nobody knows  
Where it comes from, or goes,  
But outside it is winter.  
At the feast, the hounds bark,  
The wine flows, the fires roar,  
But the wind's at the door  
And outside it is dark.



## The Seafarer

The wide sweep of this poem plunges into exile's icy depths, then soars to the heights of spiritual ecstasy. In between, we have deep insight into an Anglo-Saxon soul, torn between hobbit-like happiness at home and dangerous adventure on the high seas.

The text of the poem in the Exeter Book is problematic. This version omits a long sermon, tacked onto the end, which never refers to the poem. The cuckoo, out of place in the original, finds a perfect nest here. This translation was honored with the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize in 2011.



I can sing my own song true, and tell  
of my journeys and trials, how I suffered  
days of toil and hardship, heart's grief  
endured in the ship's hold of sorrow,  
the terrible rolling and plunging of the waves.

Harrowing night watch on the vessel's prow  
was often my lot, as the boat beat and pitched  
its way beneath the cliffs. My feet  
felt the pinch of cold, chained  
in fetters of frost. The clutch of fear  
was hot around my heart; inward hunger  
ate at my water-weary mind.

How little he knows  
whose feet are planted safe  
on solid ground, about this life of mine  
on the ice-cold ocean, how winter-long  
I walked the exile's tracks, hung with icicles,  
bereft of friends. Showers of hailstones flew.  
The only sound was the pounding  
sea, the ice-heavy wave. Sometimes  
the wild swan's song I took

for my pleasure, the gannet's cry,  
 the curlew's call instead of the laughter  
 of men, the seagull's mewing  
 instead of honey mead.

Storms beat  
 against the stone cliffs, and the tern,  
 icy-feathered, cries out in reply. Often  
 the dew-feathered eagle screams.  
 No kinfolk to comfort and protect  
 the poor soul in need. The sad voice  
 of the cuckoo, watchman of summer, sings  
 foreboding sorrow, bitter in the breast.

He little knows, the much-blessed man,  
 what one endures who plants his footprints  
 on the paths of exile. He will hardly believe,  
 who owns this life's joys, proud and wine-happy,  
 safe and snug in the town, what I, worn-out, weary  
 must endure on the pathways of the sea.

Night shadows darken, snow comes  
 from the north. Hoarfrost binds  
 the ground; hail falls to earth,  
 the coldest of grains. And yet,  
 beating upon the heart, still it comes—  
 the urge to try  
 the play of the high sea's salt waves  
 for myself, the soul always spurring  
 the spirit to fare forth, and far hence  
 seek out foreign lands and people.

No man on earth is so proud in spirit  
 so great in his gifts, in youth so daring,  
 so bold in deeds, nor his lord so kind  
 that he has no fear at his setting forth to sea  
 about what his God will bring him.

But he pays no heed to the harp, nor to gifts of rings,  
 the joys of his wife nor this world's bliss  
 nor to anything else but the rolling of the waves.  
 He will always be restless who sets out on the water.

Trees take on flowers, turning towns fair,  
meadows lovely. The whole world quickens—  
all this recalls the eager spirit,  
the soul to its journey, for one who intends  
to fare far on the paths of ocean.

So now my heart soars up  
out of its chest, and flies—  
my soul across the seaways,  
the kingdom of the whale, goes circling wide  
over the surface of the world, coming back to me  
eager and greedy. The lone flyer screams—  
whetting the spirit irresistibly  
over the whale-way, over the wide expanses of the sea.

## Satan's Rebellion

From the Anglo-Saxon Genesis

With bold imagination, the poet turns Satan into a dark, dramatic antihero, hundreds of years before Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It is at least possible that Milton heard of this version—he was friends with the scholar Junius, who owned the manuscript.

The language of the Anglo-Saxon Genesis indicates that it came from two different sources: an early manuscript (Genesis A), and a later account of Satan's rebellion and the Temptation (Genesis B), from which the next two excerpts are taken. Genesis B seems to have been translated from an Old Saxon original. The Anglo-Saxons were very interested in bringing Christianity to Anglia and Saxony, their old homelands in Europe, and the effort was evidently paying off.



### *God creates Lucifer*

One He had worked with such strength,  
so mighty in his mind and thought,  
that He granted him the greatest power,  
highest next to Him in Heaven's kingdom.  
He had made him so radiant,  
so fair his form among the hosts of Heaven  
that he blazed like a brilliant star . . . .

Dear as he was to our Lord,  
it could not be kept secret from Him  
that his angel was growing arrogant.  
He raised himself up against his Master,  
spoke hateful, boasting words, refusing  
to serve God, declaring that his own body  
was lovely and light-filled,  
glistening, shimmering.

He could not find it in his heart  
to give the Lord his loyalty and service.  
He thought he had more strength and skill,  
more angel hosts to follow him  
than holy God himself....

“Why should I slave?” said he.  
“I have no need for a master.  
With my own hand I can work so many wonders.  
I have the power to raise a greater throne,  
higher still in Heaven. Why should I be subject  
to His pleasure, bow to Him in servitude?  
I can be God as well as He!”

Then the Almighty was filled with wrath,  
high Heaven’s guardian, and threw him down  
from his lofty throne....  
Three long days and nights  
he and his angels fell from highest Heaven  
into Hell, and God turned them all  
into devils....

There, through nights immeasurable  
each fiend suffers everlasting fire.  
Then at dawn comes an eastern wind,  
frost wickedly cold. Forever fire  
or spears, some terrible torment  
they are doomed to suffer.

*Satan plots vengeance on God and Man*

“He has not done right  
to fling us into the fire’s depths  
in this place called Hell,  
depriving us of Heaven’s kingdom—  
which He now intends to settle  
with Mankind.

“That burns me most of all,  
that Adam—made of *dirt!*—  
should sit upon my mighty throne,  
filled with joy, while we must suffer  
punishment and torture here in Hell.

“Oh, if my hands were freed  
and I could fly from here just once,  
for one short winter hour.  
Then I and this mighty army....

“But no. I lie here in hard irons,  
huge bars hot-forged and hammered.  
God has chained me by the neck.  
So I know that He has read my mind  
and realized that evil would befall  
between the two of us, myself and Adam,  
disputing over Heaven’s kingdom,  
if only I had the free use of my hands!

*Satan asks for a volunteer*

“If I ever gave any thane princely treasures  
in years gone by, when we dwelt in happiness  
in that good kingdom, and held our thrones,  
there would never be a better time  
to repay my gifts than now.

“If any thane of mine were able  
and willing, he might fly up  
out of this prison on feathered wings,  
winding his way among the clouds  
to where Adam and Eve, new-created  
live lapped in abundance  
on their earthly realm—while we  
are thrown in this deep abyss.

“Now *they* are more beloved by the Lord.  
Now *they* possess the wealth that we  
should rule by right in Heaven....  
Think about this, every one of you—  
think how we can betray them!  
I would rest more softly in my chains  
if they should lose their kingdom.”

## Charms for Childbirth

(Metrical Charm 8)

While some charms are simply “charming,” these are a reminder of how hard it was for women in the days before modern medicine. Even conception was tinged with dread. But sound principles of psychology are evident in these rituals dealing with hope and fear and grief.



### 1. *At conception*

When a woman may be with child, she goes to bed with her husband and says:

*Up I will get, over you I will step  
with a live child, not with a dead one,  
with a full-born, not with a doomed one.*

### 2. *To nourish the unborn*

A woman who cannot bear a child takes a handful of milk from a cow of a single color. She sips it with her mouth, then goes to a brook and spews the milk into it. With the same hand, she takes a mouthful of the water and swallows it. She says these words:

*Wherever I carry this wonderful child  
It will grow strong from this wonderful food  
I will have this child and go home*

When she leaves the brook she does not look back or return. She goes into a different house than the one she came from, and there eats some food.

### 3. *When the child moves*

When a mother can feel that her child has quickened, she goes to the church, stands before the altar, and says:

*Christ, I say to you, behold this child!*

#### 4. *For delayed birth*

A woman who cannot bear a child goes to a wise man's grave. She steps over the grave three times, and three times says these words:

*This is to cure me of hateful late birth.*

*This is to cure me of dark black birth.*

*This is to cure me of hateful lame birth.*

[A "black birth" was a dark-colored "blue" baby. A "lame birth" was an ineffectual labor.]

#### 5. *For a stillborn child*

A woman who cannot give birth takes a clod from her own child's grave. She wraps it in black wool and sells it to the merchants, saying:

*I have sold it, now you sell it*

*The black wool and its seed of sorrow*



## Riddles

*from the Exeter Book*

The Anglo-Saxons were fond of riddles, and theirs were delightfully vivid and lively. Some are so bawdy we can hardly believe they were found in the Bishop of Exeter's book. But aside from what some of them obviously *suggest*, all have another, more innocent answer. So even the monks could enjoy them—while teasing their blushing brothers about their “sinful” thoughts!



### Riddle 25

I'm a wonderful creature,  
a comfort to women  
and useful to neighbors,  
harming no one  
but the one who wounds me.

I stand up firmly, high and proud  
above the bed. My lower part,  
somewhere beneath, is shaggy.

Sometimes a fair farmer's daughter  
will make a grab, a daring maid  
will get a grip on me.

Rushing upon my redness,  
ravaging my head, she  
sticks me in a dark and secret place.

Before long she will feel the force  
of our meeting, the curly-haired  
maiden who holds me fast—  
her eye will be wet.

## Riddle 27

I'm treasured by men, found far and wide  
brought forth from forests and fortresses,  
hills and vales. By day I'm borne aloft  
on wings, carried with care  
to a sheltering roof. Then they give me  
a bath in a barrel. Now I become  
the enslaver and scourge of men,  
quickly throwing young heroes to the earth  
and sometimes their elders as well.

Whoever feuds with me, setting himself  
against my strength, soon finds  
that his back will be bouncing on the ground.  
Let him talk tough  
but unless he repents his foolishness in time  
his strength will be stolen, his power sapped.  
He will lose control of his hands, his feet, his mind.

Guess what they call me,  
who on this earth enslave men so,  
leaving them befuddled from my blows  
when daylight dawns.

## Riddle 44

It hangs in splendor by a man's thigh,  
beneath its master's cloak. There's an opening in front.  
It's stiff and hard, and finds a fitting home  
when the youth lifts his robe above his knees,  
hoping to greet with its dangling head  
the familiar hole of equal length  
he has filled so many times before.

## Riddle 5

I'm a lonely wretch, wounded by iron,  
bitten by swords. I'm sick and tired  
of war-work, weary of blades.  
I've seen too much fierce fighting.  
No comfort will come, no rescue  
from battles between men  
until I am utterly destroyed.

The hammer's heirloom hits me  
hard-edged and battle-sharp  
the smith's handiwork bites.  
I will never find a doctor on this field  
to heal my wounds with herbs.  
So my sword-scars only grow greater  
with death-blows day and night.

## Riddle 61

Sometimes a lovely lady locks me  
up tight in her drawers. Sometimes,  
at her dear lord's request,  
she teasingly takes me out  
and gives him what he's asking for.

Then he sticks his head inside me,  
working his way from underneath  
up into my narrow place. If the man  
who seizes me is strong enough,  
my loveliness will soon be filled  
with something rough and shaggy.

Tell me what I mean!

## Riddle 46

*The Queen of Sheba is said to have posed this riddle to Solomon.*

A man sat at wine with two wives  
two sons and two daughters,  
beloved sisters, and their two noble  
firstborn sons. The father of each  
of those princes was present,  
and also the uncle and nephew.  
In all, there were five  
in the family sitting there.

## Riddle 45

I hear tell of something  
rising in a corner: growing,  
enlarging, raising its roof.  
The bride, a prince's daughter  
proudly grasps the boneless, swelling thing  
and places it under her cloth.

## Riddle 47

A moth munching on words—  
I thought it something strange and weird  
when I heard about that wonder,  
how a worm would swallow  
the songs of men, a thief in the dark  
of our glorious speech  
and its firm foundation.

And yet, this larcenous little guest  
was not one whit the wiser  
for all of the words he devoured.

## Riddle 54

The young man came  
to the place he knew he'd find her, standing  
in the corner. The bold and vigorous youth  
stepped up to her and, hefting up  
his own robe with his hands,  
thrust in something stiff beneath her girdle.

He worked his will upon her  
standing there. They trembled  
and shook. The thane was in a hurry.  
He was up to the job at first,  
that willing plowboy, but after a while  
grew weary of the work.

Beneath her girdle there began to grow  
something men love  
and pay good money for.

## Answers to Riddles

These riddles do not come with answers, and some in the Exeter Book have still not been solved.

Here are some likely answers—maybe you can come up with even better ones.

25. An onion

27. Honey mead

44. A key

5. A shield

61. A shirt

46. Lot's family

The five (where there should be fifteen) are Lot, his two daughters, and the two sons he had by them.

45. Bread dough

47. A bookworm

54. A butter churn

# *Beowulf*

The joyless creature came to the house of men.  
In a rage, he tore through the iron-bound door,  
ripped open the building's mouth.  
Now his tread fell on the inlaid floor.  
Heart filled with anger, from his eyes there gleamed,  
like fire, an unlovely light.

He saw a host of men before him,  
a band of warriors and kinsmen  
all asleep. Then his heart laughed—  
before the sun rose he meant to tear  
each and every life out of its body.  
Tonight, the fiend thought,  
he would get his fill.

But after this night, fate  
was not to let him go on feasting  
on the meat of men.  
Hygelac's powerful kinsman  
was watching him carefully  
to see how the creature  
would launch his attack.

Without delay, the monster seized  
on a sleeping man, ripped him open  
without resistance, bit through his joints,  
drank the blood from his veins, and bolted  
his flesh in huge, horrible chunks.  
Before long the dead man had disappeared  
right down to his hands and feet.

*The fight with Grendel*

Now the creature began to creep closer,  
reaching out with his claw. Suddenly  
he clutched at the stout-hearted warrior  
lying still on his bed.

Beowulf sat bolt upright  
quickly grabbed hold of the evil thing  
and set his weight against its arm.



That master of murder now realized  
he had never met, on this middle earth,  
the grip of a stronger hand.

Heart-fear for his life now filled him,  
but he couldn't shake free.  
He was in a panic to be out of there,  
running back to his lair, his devil's den.  
He had never been in such a fix before.

Then Beowulf remembered all the boasts  
he had spoken that evening. Now he stood upright  
and tightened his grip. Finger bones burst—  
the ogre fought to get free  
but the warrior stayed with him.

The nightmare creature was wild to escape  
whichever way, flee back to the fens,  
but he could feel that the strength of his fingers  
was in his grim enemy's grip. It was a hard trip  
he had made to Heorot.

A mighty uproar broke out in the mead-hall—  
the brave Danes listened in wonder to the din  
of that furious drinking-bout. The building  
rang out with the rage of the combatants.  
It was a wonder the wine-hall could withstand  
the two terrible warriors, that the beautiful building  
did not crumple and fall to the ground—  
but it was held fast, inside and out, by iron bands,  
the blacksmith's cunning craftsmanship.

The mead benches, inlaid with gold,  
so I hear tell, bent and bounced  
from the floor as the enemies grappled.  
No Scylding would have thought before  
that this splendid horned hall could be broken  
by any craft, unless it should be swallowed up  
in the hot embrace of fire.

Now a sound rose higher, sending chills of horror  
through every North-Dane around the wall  
who heard that wail—it was the enemy of God  
singing a terrible song, that hell-slave  
screaming in his pain. He was held fast  
by the man whose might was greatest  
in that day of this life.

The defender of men would not for anything  
let go of his murderous guest alive—  
a life no good to anyone. Beowulf's men  
now brandished their ancient blades  
trying to defend their famous lord.

What they didn't know, those hardened warriors  
hacking away on every side, seeking the monster's soul  
was that no iron sword on earth, however sharp,  
could touch him—he had cast a spell  
that made him safe from any weapon's edge.

But the parting of his soul  
from that day of this life  
would be a sorry one—  
that strange spirit would journey far  
into the fiends' kingdom.

He now realized, whose hate for God,  
whose crimes had caused mankind such grief,  
that his mortal form would fail him.  
Hygelac's courageous kinsman  
had him by the hand. Each one's life  
was hateful to the other.

The terror-monster's body screamed with pain.  
A great, gaping wound tore his shoulder—  
  
the sinews sprang apart  
and the bone-lock burst.

Beowulf was granted glory  
in the battle. Life-sick, Grendel fled  
back the fens, his joyless lair.