



Dan Veitch

Beowulf & Beyond

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

Beowulf
&
Beyond

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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!