



Dan Veach

Beowulf & Beyond

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

Beowulf & Beyond

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

Dan Veach



LOCKWOOD PRESS
Atlanta, GA

Contents

Foreword	vii
Preface	ix
TALES FROM THE VENERABLE BEDE	1
The Story of Caedmon	3
Pope Gregory sees an Angle	5
The Story of the Sparrow	6
From the Venerable Bede, <i>by A. E. Stallings</i>	7
Bede's Death Song	8
BLOOD & BATTLE	9
Viking Attack on Lindisfarne	11
The Battle of Brunanburg	12
The Battle of Maldon	15
Norman Invasion of 1066	28
LOVE & LOSS	31
The Seafarer	33
The Wife's Lament	36
The Husband's Message	39
The Wanderer	41
BOLD SPIRITS	47
From the Anglo-Saxon Genesis	49
Satan's Rebellion	49
The Temptation	52
The Sacrifice of Isaac	57
Dream of the Rood	60
<i>Judith</i>	67

MAGIC & MYSTERY	79
Magic Spells	81
To Heal the Land	81
For a Swarm of Bees	82
Charms for Childbirth	83
Maxims	85
Riddles	88
#25. "I'm a wonderful creature"	88
#27. "I'm treasured by men, found far and wide"	89
#44. "It hangs in splendor by a man's thigh"	89
#5. "I'm a lonely wretch, wounded by iron"	90
#61. "Sometimes a lady locks me"	90
#46. "A man sat at wine with two wives"	91
#45. "I hear tell of something"	91
#47. "A moth munching on words"	91
#54. "The young man came"	92
Answers to Riddles	93
 BEOWULF	 95
Episodes	97
Introduction	99
<i>Beowulf</i>	111
I. Grendel	111
II. Grendel's Mother	150
III. The Dragon	173
The Finnsburg Fragment	215
 SELECTED READINGS AND MEDIA	 219

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.