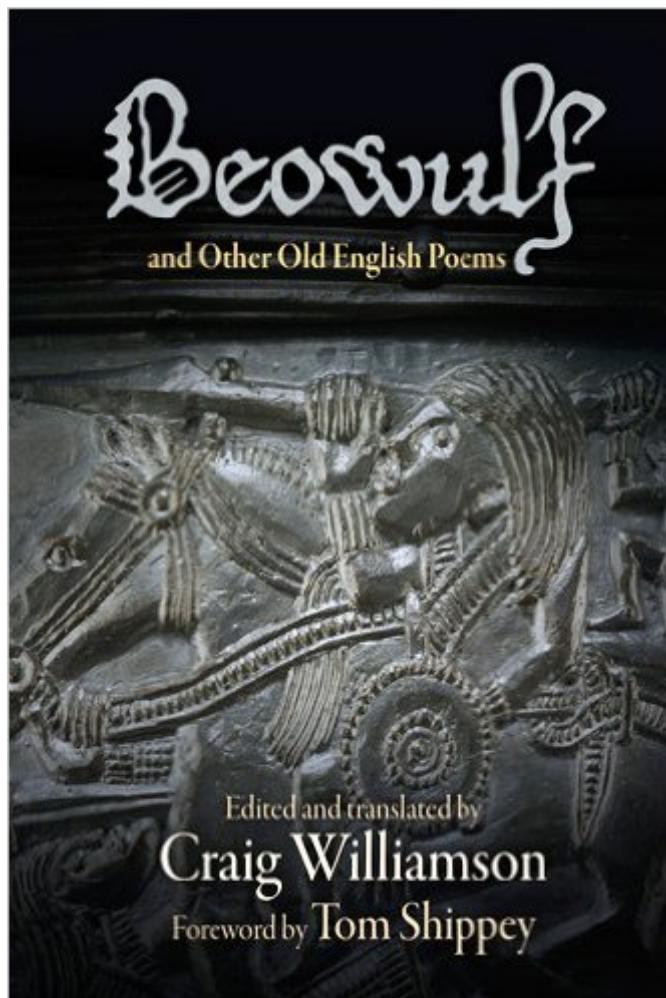


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"Beowulf" And Other Old English Poems (The Middle Ages Series)



Synopsis

The best-known literary achievement of Anglo-Saxon England, Beowulf is a poem concerned with monsters and heroes, treasure and transience, feuds and fidelity. Composed sometime between 500 and 1000 C.E. and surviving in a single manuscript, it is at once immediately accessible and forever mysterious. And in Craig Williamson's splendid new version, this often translated work may well have found its most compelling modern English interpreter. Williamson's Beowulf appears alongside his translations of many of the major works written by Anglo-Saxon poets, including the elegies "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," the heroic "Battle of Maldon," the visionary "Dream of the Rood," the mysterious and heart-breaking "Wulf and Eadwacer," and a generous sampling of the Exeter Book riddles. Accompanied by a foreword by noted medievalist Tom Shippey on Anglo-Saxon history, culture, and archaeology, and Williamson's introductions to the individual poems as well as his essay on translating Old English, the texts transport us back to the medieval scriptorium or ancient mead hall to share an exile's lament or herdsman's recounting of the story of the world's creation. From the riddling song of a bawdy onion that moves between kitchen and bedroom, to the thrilling account of Beowulf's battle with a treasure-hoarding dragon, the world becomes a place of rare wonder in Williamson's lines. Were his idiom not so modern, we might almost think the Anglo-Saxon poets had taken up the lyre again and begun to sing after a silence of a thousand years.

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Customer Reviews

Following an admirably informative and clear introduction on Old English poetics, Williamson offers a very good translation of Beowulf, both in terms of its fidelity to the source material, and in terms of its (much more difficult to quantify) poetic "feel." Not only does Williamson do a good job of using alliteration without being very conspicuous about it (none of the "six sly snakes sip straws by the stream" kind of thing), but he carefully chooses a vocabulary which suggests timelessness without archaism. This is a major problem with some Beowulf translations, which use such an archaic register of English that one needs a glossary to read them - or such a modern vocabulary that the poem never really gets a chance to cast its spell. Some sections in particular - Beowulf's boasts in Heorot, Wiglaf's speech to the cowardly retainers, and several of the fight scenes - are really well-rendered. On the negative side, there are slips, where words that seem excessively modern creep through - "cancel my days" (l. 640), "cheap bargain" (l. 2415), and "East-Germanic tribes" (l. 2496), for example, broke the flow of the writing to me. The translator is clearly a fan of J. R. R. Tolkien, and the nods to, and citations of, Tolkien sometimes seem excessive. But the best part of this book is suggested by the other half of its title - "Other Old English Poems." Williamson's translation of Beowulf falls a little short of Liuzza's for me in terms of fluency and art (but a good way ahead of Heaney's).

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