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< Translation of 'Beowulf' Revives Epic Tale

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NEAL CONAN, host:

Long relegated to the dusty shows of academe, the thousand-year-old poem is the basis of a movie that was number one at the box office this past weekend: "Beowulf."

But in many ways, popular interest in the story revived seven years ago with the publication of a new translation by the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Here, he describes the end of Beowulf's desperate struggle with the demon, Grendel.

Mr. SEAMUS HEANEY (Poet, Ireland): The monster's whole body was in pain. A tremendous wound appeared on his shoulder, sinuous split and bone loppings burst. Beowulf was granted the glory of winning. Grendel was driven under the fen banks, fatally hurt to his desolate lair. His days were numbered, the end of his life was coming over him. He knew it for certain. And one bloody clash had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.

CONAN: And in some ways, that's where the story really begins. If you have questions for Seamus Heaney about the story, the poetry and the meaning of "Beowulf," our number is 800-989-8255. E-mail: talk@npr.org. You can weigh in on our blog if you'd like. That's at npr.org/blogofthenation. A new illustrated edition of Seamus Heaney's translation of "Beowulf" is just out. The poet joins us now from the studios of RTE Radio in Dublin.

And welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

Mr. HEANEY: Yeah, nice to be here. I've got a bit of a flu, so I hope my voice isn't too deep.

CONAN: Oh, it's lovely to hear you.

Mr. HEANEY: Okay.

CONAN: And thanks very much for taking the time to come in if you're not feeling that well...

Mr. HEANEY: Right.

CONAN: ...but I wanted to ask you why do we need to still read "Beowulf"?

Mr. HEANEY: Well, it's a magnificent story, first of all. It has - it's about a life being tested and a young man winning glory, an old man facing the end of his own life, fitting crises and actually, it's not only a story of action. It's a story of elegy. I mean, there's an elegiac quality to it that I really like about, a sense of a life that was fought hard, fought for hard in the beginning and great earned eminence and at the very end, a test arising. What we always dread something coming up out of the deep - took that you have ignored or back and buried and suddenly, it appears, is it dragging at the end of "Beowulf," maybe it's because I was on my 60s more or less when I was doing it, but my favorite bit almost is the end when the dragon awakes in the cave in the - in the gold hoard and starts to burn up Beowulf's kingdom, and Beowulf has to come out and confront him. Both of them are kind of tired elders, but both of them have to face the final ordeal and the - each perish in that ordeal. I don't think you have to read "Beowulf" but it is - it's got the shape of a life and it's - and they're recognizable melody of grief and though, I think that suits everybody.

CONAN: It comes, as you're describing it, at a moment when "Beowulf" and his - people of his time were, of course, what we would call today pagans. They were not Christians, yet there's a Christian overlay to the poem as we found it as that one document that was discovered what, a thousands years ago.

Mr. HEANEY: Yeah, well the - it's an interesting thing because the poet himself - and as I was translating it, I got to like the voice of the poet who - he is clearly a Christian,

maybe scribe or he is somebody who has been changed by the Christian vision. And actually, his voice is telling the story of the previous heroic age, when, you know, there was no virtue in turning the other cheek. The heroic age, it went out - you won glory by defeating enemies by calling up danger and facing it and overcoming it.

So the melody of a kind of Christian understanding and submission to the Almighty is in the voice of the poet. I mean, he says, at times, the truth is clear, almighty God ruled over mankind and always has. You know, this kind of thing bless does he who after death can approach the Lord and find friendship in the Father's embrace. So you have that very gentle Christian resigned attitude.

But then, you know, at the same time, the story is telling is the story of a fighter and a boaster. And these boasts are form of different points in the poem when Beowulf has to face the monsters as, you know, with grunting the swords of the - even the swords of a name, grunting as they own the swords yet, with grunting, I shall gain glory and die. And, you know, all through the poem, he is boasting about - Beowulf himself is boasting in the old way. It is always better, he says at one point, to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning. Let whoever can win glory before death when the warrior is gone, that would be his best and only bulwark.

Beowulf doesn't talk about the afterlife, or going to the steadfast ones as he calls them after death. He is living in this life, and the system that he is into is a system of boasting, glory-winning, treasure-winning, being made into the hero of a poem. He is after a reputation later on rather than an eternal life in heaven or purgatory or indeed hell. Those things don't matter to him. It's the reputation after death.

CONAN: We're talking with Seamus Heaney. His translation of "Beowulf," is now in a new illustrated edition, just as the movie came out. They have nothing to do with each other, but, well, the timing is fortuitous.

You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And let's get a caller on the line. We'll go now to Elizabeth(ph). Elizabeth calling us from Columbus, Ohio.

ELIZABETH (Caller): Yes, thanks you so much for taking my call.

CONAN: Go ahead, please.

ELIZABETH: I'm actually a Ph.D. student in medieval literature and absolutely had a joy of teaching "Beowulf" earlier this quarter. And I'd like to say that my students actually liked "Beowulf" a lot better than they expected to. It's a tale of bravery and pride and boasting and kind of these epic battles. And a number of them saw the movie as I did myself this weekend. And my question for Seamus Heaney - thank you so much, it's a very interesting conversation - is you have an Anglo-Saxon poem about Scandinavian warriors. And you, as an Irish poet, kind of retelling this tale. And so I was wondering if you could kind of comment on this kind of retelling of these tales and these different cultures, kind of telling the stories of different cultures and that how you approach the poem that way as an Irish poet.

Mr. HEANEY: Well, I didn't think of myself, you know - I didn't position myself immediately as an Irish poet. Actually, as an Irish student in Belfast in the late 1950s, I studied "Beowulf" for my English literature B.A., so it was part of my memory and I actually liked the Anglo-Saxon poetry when I was at Queens - the melody of it good into my ear. And so when it was suggested that I translate it, I knew it already in a way. Of course, I did begin to think about my position as an Irish writer doing it. So what I did, for better or worse, I put in certain words that had an Irish basis. They're, of course, English dialect, if you like. But they give it, for me, a certain Irish tune.

And as a matter of fact, I couldn't have got started on it if I hadn't had the tune of my father's cousins. I mentioned this in the introduction into the book, people called the scullions, who spoke with great solemnity, with, and - they could say simple things and give them a great, again a bit of aura, of majesty and importance. So I thought that that dignified simple utterance, was useful for "Beowulf" in the verse in "Beowulf." This is written in verse. It's not a prose translation.

So I imagined the voice that I imagined speaking the poem was the voice of these old fellows who might known as the monster(ph). I just have a bit of the poem open in front of me here in Dublin studio. The geek people built a pyre for Beowulf. Now, if my old fellows have been speaking, they will say, the geek people built the pyre for

Beowulf stacked and decked it until it stood four square. And that, I suppose, was the fundamental Irishism in my relationship to it. I also used a term for the hall, the king's - the Danish king's hall which is under attack by the monsters. It's called Heorot, and it's a center of civilization of feasting, of music, of the warriors not fighting but being there with their lord and receiving gifts so on and so on. So it's a center of civilization in the midst of this dark, menaced country. The word I use for it here and there throughout the translation was bawn, B-A-W-N, which is a word that was used in Ireland in the 17th Century, when the English settlers came over. There has rebawned(ph). So there, I thought of it that as a way of Irishing it, a wee bit.

CONAN: Elizabeth, thanks very much.

And Seamus Heaney, thanks so much for your time.

Mr. HEANEY: Yes, thank you.

CONAN: This is NPR News.

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