

Shippey, Tom, trans., and Leonard Neidorf, ed. 2023. *Beowulf: Translation and Commentary*. London: Uppsala Books. Pp. ii + 418. ISBN 9781961361003.

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This compact volume (also available as paperback or eBook) is an admirable introduction to a classic poem, and perhaps *the* introduction. It is arranged thus. Translation, translator's preface, and an appendix on Tolkien are by Tom Shippey; everything else is by Leonard Neidorf. We start with the latter's introduction to the poem (1–27), including a generous bibliography. Then, his appreciation of the translator (29–34); for Tom Shippey has during seven decades been in the heroic forefront of Old English Studies. Small wonder that the editor styles himself as “honored to be here and elsewhere the James Boswell of this Dr. Johnson” (33).

After that, Tom Shippey's preface, with a disarming admission that “quite a lot of the poem simply *does not mean very much*” (35). Specifically, he points out dangers for the literal-minded of (for example) words like *sige* “victory” (37–38). Then the editor's note on the text and emendations to it (47–53). Poem and facing translation follow (54–239), with commentary thereafter (241–348). The latter is set out in a novel way. It is divided into 55 sections, all dealing with a passage of the text. Each section has two parts: discussion and bibliography. The technique has advantages. Those concerned with, say, the poet's allusions to the saga of Sigemund (ll. 853–97) will find them neatly presented with up-to-date references (273–74).

The book's last part has a surprise: an appendix or essay by Tom Shippey on J. R. R. Tolkien's life-long preoccupation with *Beowulf*, wherein a personal gift for fantasy produced insights for his celebrated British Academy lecture of 1936; a quality admirable in itself, if perhaps then doing “more harm than good” (356) when writers less talented than Tolkien borrowed his approaches. Shippey deals too with the reverse process. If a taste for fantasy helped Tolkien to understand *Beowulf*, the poem repaid that by inspiring much for *The Lord of the Rings*. In ancient poetry there was hence a seed for the “unequaled success” (367) of that twentieth-century masterpiece. We close with a full and useful bibliography (373–418).

So, we have a happy symbiosis: a book essential for elementary students and advanced researchers; a translation of *Beowulf* which is at once (rare combination) lucid and exact; and discussion which abounds in ideas and yet shows an eye for detail, including abstruse points of metre or dialect or mythology. As if that were not enough (for linguists, historians, mythographers), there is plenty more on *Beowulf's* critical reception, a subject leading to how the poem's creative possibilities found so remarkable a response in J. R. R. Tolkien's imagination. This is an asset. It means that the volume should be consulted by those intrigued at how Tolkien came to write as he did, as well as by Anglo-Saxonists. Only a glossary is lacking. But that is readily supplied by editions of Klaeber. One can say more. Shippey and Neidorf provide easy access to Klaeber's editorial work (known for recondite abbreviations and intimidating profusion of

reference). Thanks to them, everyone dealing with *Beowulf* now has a key to the treasure-chamber of earlier editions, or even the one possible substitute for them?

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