

Wrap-Up: The Anglo-Saxon Epic

The Epic in Translation

The following versions of *Beowulf* prove the power of the translator. Although both describe the same passage (Grendel's murderous raid on Herot), they are stunningly dissimilar.

*“Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster’s
Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
He slipped through the door and there in the silence
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
To his lair, delighted with his night’s slaughter.”*

—Translated by Burton Raffel

*“So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
were settling into it after their drink,
and there he came upon them, a company of the best
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
and human sorrow. Suddenly then
the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses.”*

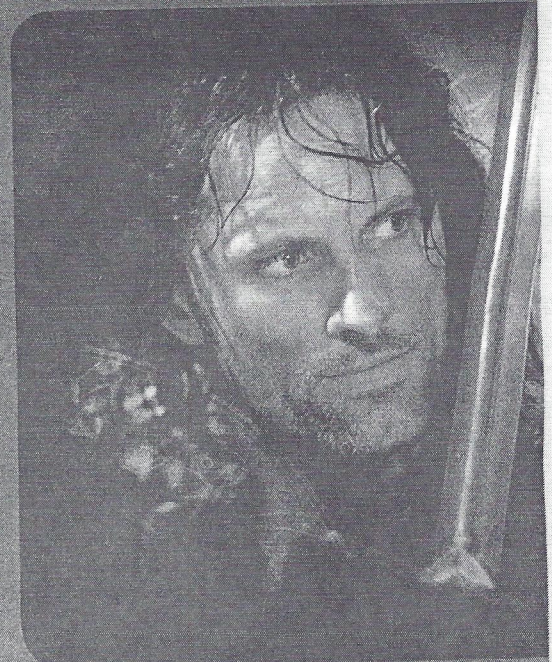
—Translated by Seamus Heaney

Writing to Compare

Write a short essay comparing Raffel's and Heaney's translations. Do you prefer one over the other? Cite specific lines as support.

Consider

- each translator's choice of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs
- the varying order of phrases and ideas
- each selection's imagery, rhythm, and tone



The character Aragorn, a hero from the modern-day epic *The Lord of the Rings*

Extension Online

INQUIRY & RESEARCH With one or more of your classmates, use the Internet to compile a list of literary and cinematic epics. Starting with a primary search engine, you may also want to search online movie databases as well as literary reference sites. Of the works you find, which feature heroes closest in spirit and deeds to Beowulf?



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