

Dusting Off the Classics: *Beowulf*
University of Denver – University College Enrichment Program – Winter/Spring 2019
Richard Sacks

Five Thursday sessions from 6:30-8:30pm
March 21, 28, April 4, 11, 18
Room 287, Sturm Hall, DU campus

Course homepage: <https://sacks-richard.com/beowulf-at-du>
Professor Sacks' email: sacks.richard@gmail.com

COURSE DESCRIPTION

"*Beowulf* is Back!" *The Atlantic* boldly announced in its April 2017 issue. This Old English epic poem from the first millennium has mostly been relegated to the back benches of English literature since its rediscovery some 300 years ago. So why does it speak to us so powerfully today? Join Professor Richard Sacks, who spent four decades at Columbia University teaching ancient texts such as the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf* and *Genesis*, in a close and careful reading of the dark landscapes of this astonishing poem which follows the 50-plus-year career of the Geatish hero Beowulf as he strives to do what is right despite the monstrous forces of the world in which he lives. There are the (in)famous literal monsters that Beowulf is able to destroy—Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon guarding the ancient treasures of our earth. But where is the line between human and monster in such struggles? There are the monsters of history and politics Beowulf faces—ancient tribal hatreds and resentments among Swedes, Danes, Beowulf's Geats and others. But can such tribal monsters of our world ever be tamed? And lurking just below the surface of the poem, there are also the monsters related to, yet at odds with, the gods—the serpent that destroys Thor and the wolf that destroys Woden. But can we prevent such self-destructive and world-ending battles from reenacting themselves in our souls and societies? These are the kinds of ancient yet contemporary questions with which *Beowulf* will confront us as we work our way through this remarkable poem.

READING SCHEDULE

March 21	lines 1-85	Introduction to <i>Beowulf</i> and its traditions
March 28	lines 86-1231	Our first encounter with Beowulf — the Grendel sequence and its aftermath Navigating the line between human and monster
April 4	lines 1232-2199	Beowulf post-Grendel — the Grendel's mother sequence and its aftermath Navigating the elemental forces within and without
April 11	lines 2200-2820	Beowulf 50 years later — the dragon sequence and its aftermath Navigating the monstrous forces of history
April 18	lines 2821-3182	Beyond the death(s) of Beowulf

RECOMMENDED TRANSLATION/EDITION

We will use the verse translation (with the Old English on facing pages) of Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney: Seamus Heaney (translator), *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (Bilingual Edition), W.W. Norton & Company (2000), ISBN 978-0393320978 (2001 paperback edition)

ONLINE RESOURCES

Materials such as handouts and weekly updates will be posted on the course website "materials and info" page: <https://sacks-richard.com/beowulf-course-materials>

[K. Kiernan's *Electronic Beowulf*](#) (4th edition, 2015, from the Univ. of Kentucky and the British Library), a complicated but brilliant website with pretty much everything you might need (other than a commentary) including text, translation, manuscript images, glossary, audio performance, etc. The state of the art!

[Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*](#) (Brodeur's 1916 translation of 13th century Old Norse mythological and poetic "primer")

[J. Bosworth & T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*](#), Oxford UP, 1898/1921 (the most complete Old English dictionary)

[Benjamin Slade's extensive self-published *Beowulf* website](#) with (among many things) dual-language text, glossary, commentary, bibliography, etc.

[Beowulf Resources](#), edited by Araby Greene, "offers general readers, students, and scholars a carefully compiled, well-organized, and continually maintained gateway to *Beowulf* studies" ([Kiernan, *Elec Beowulf* online resources page](#))