Beowulf — opening lines (1–11)

R. M. Liuzza


Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum, þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scefing sceæðena þreatum, monegum mægþum, meodo-setla ofteah egode eorlas. Syðdan ærest wearð feasceaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad, weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah oðþæt him æghwylc ymsettendra ofer hron-rade hyran scolde, gomban gyldan. Þæt wæs god cyning.

Seamus Heaney


So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns. There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes, a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes. This terror of the hall-troops had come far. A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on as his powers waxed and his worth was proved. In the end each clan on the outlying coasts beyond the whale-road had to yield to him and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

John McNamara


Hail! We have heard tales sung of the Spear-Danes, the glory of their war-kings in days gone by, how princely nobles performed heroes' deeds!

Oft Scyld Sceafing captured the mead halls from many peoples, from troops of enemies, terrifying their chieftains. Though he was first a poor foundling, he lived to find comfort; under heavens he flourished, with honors fulfilled — till each neighboring nation, those over the whale-road, bowed under his rule, paid the price of tribute. That was a good king!

Liuzza's literal word-for-word translation (The italicized words are implied by the inflectional endings in original Old English.)

What! We of the Spear-Danes in days-of-yore of the people-kings glory heard, how the noblemen valor did.

Often Scyld son-of-Sceaf from enemies' troops from many tribes mead-benches took away terrified nobles. After first he was destitute found, he for-that comfort awaited, grew under the skies, in honors prospered until to him each of the surrounding ones over the whale-riding obey had to, tribute yield. That was a good king.