

Three Translations of *Beowulf*:

Interpretation or Misrepresentation of Meaning

Paul Shannon Tierney, Lynchburg College

(Editor's note: This essay by Paul Tierney is the winner of the Kendall North Award for the best paper in the 2009 issue of the Agora.)

Beowulf is easily the most widely disseminated piece of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Individuals who have never read an actual line of Old English can recount the exploits of the poem's heroic protagonist. While it is predated by the classical epics and partly eclipsed in popular culture by the Arthurian legends, *Beowulf* retains a certain mystique possessed by few other complete works of Western literature. It comes from a dark and different age, and from an oral culture that was destroyed almost completely following the Norman Conquest of England. One of the few aspects of this culture that has survived to the modern day, namely the propensity of the English language to evolve and adapt wildly over time, is also responsible for why Anglo-Saxon poetry, like *Beowulf*, cannot be read by a speaker of Modern English without the aid of a translator. This language barrier and the requirement for an intermediary between the "author" and audience can be seen by some as a hindrance, preventing the majority of readers from experiencing the work in its original "canon" form. As Chickering writes, "One insurmountable problem with any free-standing translation of *Beowulf* is that the greatness of the original depends importantly on the clangor and magnificence of the language, the very sound of its sense. It cannot be duplicated in any other words" (Chickering, *Beowulf*, ix). The implication here is a correct one. A translation of *Beowulf* is just that, a translation of *Beowulf*, not the original. Due to numerous problems with "craggy sentence structure," "connotative vocabulary," and the alliterative form of the poem, any translator wishing to do a purely literal translation of the poem will be sorely disappointed with

the result (Chickering, *Beowulf*, xi). A certain amount of creative license is therefore required to capture both the spirit and the message of the original in a form meaningful to the modern reader. Each translation is an individual retelling of the story, related to but distinct from the original, where the translator has filled the role of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, a task made all the more difficult because the translators of today are grasping at the frayed ends of a long dead culture, bridging the gap between minds nearly twelve centuries apart.

As the product of an oral tradition, rather than a written one, the existence of *Beowulf* today is nothing short of miraculous. Oral cultures, like the one that produced *Beowulf*, view stories in a different light from a culture that promotes a primarily written tradition, like the modern West. Stories within an oral tradition are mutable living things that change and grow in the telling. While each retelling of a story contains much of the original, details and diction shift over time, adjusting themselves to the tastes of the individual audiences for whom the story is performed. The stories contained within Anglo-Saxon poetry may have never been intended for written preservation by their creators because writing inadvertently leads to canon, and the establishment of a definitive text. Trapp writes, “Almost all Old English poems survive in a single copy within a manuscript containing other texts that were transcribed in the West Saxon dialect about 1000 CE... What do exist are about thirty thousand lines, of which *Beowulf* makes up about a tenth (3). It would be fallacious to assume that what has been passed down represents the entirety of Anglo-Saxon poetical tradition. Likewise, scholars cannot even be sure that what survives is representative of that tradition (Trapp 3). What modern academics possess is like having a handful of badly damaged photographs from somebody else’s family album. The version of *Beowulf* that survives in Cotton MS Vitellius A. XV is simply one stage of that

poem's existence that, for whatever reason, happened to be recorded and survived to the modern day.

Rita Copeland, an expert on semantics, pedagogy, and Medieval criticism offers some insight into the world that produced *Beowulf*. She argues that between the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of the late Middle Ages, there was a sharp decline in the availability of professional grammarians, about which Copeland writes, “A fundamental and necessary element of that professional identity was pedantry: erudition about literary language, linguistic usage, and information gleaned from canonical texts that could be pursued legitimately for its own sake” (56). Given that *Beowulf* was produced by a culture to which standardized grammatical and semantic practices as the modern world knows them were wholly foreign, it is more than likely that the language of *Beowulf* contains many connotative meanings, linguistic divergences, and artistic license either undetectable or so anachronistic that they retain little meaning to the modern reader. The resurgence of organized linguistics in England during the late Middle Ages and later in the Renaissance antiquated and expunged many elements of Old and Middle English. The means by which readers and listeners evaluated works also changed. An increased emphasis began to be placed on the “literal sense” of a work, a throwback to the classical era because “it bears repeating that the literal sense was not only a hermeneutical tradition, and its ‘materiality’ in the Middle Ages as a practice and as a political issue was not only that of a Christian theology founded on an incarnational mystery” (Copeland 72). The literal sense, commonly utilized as a teaching tool, involves viewing myths, stories, tales, and writings as lessons for future living. While some of this literal sense is obviously present in *Beowulf*, particularly during the sections referencing Christianity, it is equally obvious that the greater part of the work has its origins in a literary tradition with different aims from those of pedagogical teaching. *Beowulf* is first and

foremost meant to entertain its audience with grand tales of heroism and epic characters. Even though *Beowulf* was presumably written down only a few hundred years before the morality plays of the later Middle Ages, the two works are worlds apart in conception, intent, and design. In order to translate *Beowulf* effectively and critically, the translator must translate not only for linguistic and historical accuracy; a translator must also translate *Beowulf* for cultural accuracy, else many of the kennings, allusions, and connotative meanings will be lost on the average reader.

Translators must then be afforded the same liberties of interpretation and composition given to the *scops*, their ancient predecessors. Likewise, the modern translators must also themselves be critiqued. Just as a theatre critic knows the abilities of an individual actor and the Anglo-Saxons knew the tendencies of an individual *scop*, so the modern reader must place both the translator and translation in context with each other. Each translation is a reflection of the intent of its translator to bring *Beowulf* in accordance with modern language. By possessing some insight into the mentality and intent of the translator during translation, the reader can better understand what stylistic differences, alterations, or “spin” has been placed on the piece without even needing to understand one word of Old English. When approaching a translation in this manner, the reader should determine two pieces of information: the kind of translation being read and the intended audience of the translation. Literal translations of *Beowulf* attempt to preserve the form and diction of the original at the expense of modern syntax and readability. Modernized or loose translations sacrifice some aspects of the poem that are distinctly Anglo-Saxon in order to make it easier to read and understand. Other types of translations include translations for children and translations for cinema, and translations that attempt to reconcile literalism and modernization. When considering the intended audience, the primary distinction

is between the academic and commercial audience. The academic (whether researcher, teacher, or student) is looking for a more critical version of the story than the commercial audience, who is primarily interested in passing the time, or being entertained. While the things valued by the researcher, the teacher, and the student differ in degree, the things valued by the commercial audience are different in kind. By understanding each translation's place as a unique work within a literary tradition, the reader reaffirms both the authority of the Old English *Beowulf* and the legitimacy of the translation.

Since its publication in 1977, Howell D. Chickering's *Dual Language Edition of Beowulf* has been considered one of the most scholarly, authoritative, and literal translations ever done. Chickering approaches the work objectively, readily indentifying his place as merely one individual in a long tradition of story tellers: "The facing gist (one man's version) and the commentary offer background information necessary for understanding. This method does not bring out every meaning of the original—poetry being the ornery, delightful thing it is—but if the reader will use these two aids alongside the Old English, he can experience its poetic power firsthand" (Chickering, *Beowulf*, ix). He also directly informs the reader that his translation is "meant to make *Beowulf* available as poetry to readers who have not studied Old English before and to those who have only a rudimentary knowledge of it" (Chickering, *Beowulf*, ix) and that his "translation takes a few liberties from time to time, but for the most part it gives the plain sense of the original or, when a literal translation would be unclear, the intended meaning as I see it" (Chickering, *Beowulf*, x). The position Chickering places the reader in is ideal because he, the translator, has taken the time to explain himself in great detail as to the nuances of his translation.

At the opposing stylistic end from Chickering is Edwin Morgan's 1952 translation. Arguably written for students and poetical enjoyment, Morgan takes great liberties with the structure of the poem, translating sentence by sentence rather than line by line. This approach results in many locations where the text of the Old English and the translation do not sync properly when placed side by side, with the translated text bearing only passing resemblance to the literal meaning of the original. This said, Morgan's modernized translation is lauded for still maintaining a certain degree of restraint. One critic cites Morgan's unwillingness to add in details that are not there simply to "liven up" the poem and goes on to say that "although no verse translation of *Beowulf* has been wholly successful, at least one reader finds satisfactory poetry in Edwin Morgan's version...possibly because Morgan does remain closer to the considerable poetic success of *Beowulf* itself" (Robinson 289).

Seamus Heaney has more recently taken an approach radically different from the previous two translators and attempted to create a translation that is understandable by the common reader while not editing or revising too many parts of the poem that distinctly link it to its Anglo-Saxon heritage. For example, while he admits to not always following the precise structure of Old English alliterative verse in his translation, Heaney only breaks this structure when he would "prefer to let the natural 'sound of sense' prevail over the demands of the convention: I have been reluctant to force an artificial shape or an unusual word choice just for the sake of correctness" (Heaney xxiii). He also stresses the importance of maintaining the feel of the original poem: "What I was after first and foremost was a narrative line that sounded as if it meant business, and I was prepared to sacrifice other things in pursuit of this directness of utterance" (Heaney xxiii). By allowing for change, Heaney asserts, the translator can make the story hit the reader with the full force of meaning. Other translators have criticized Heaney's

approach because they feel that in fence sitting the line between literalism and modernism, he is trying to make his translation seem more authoritative simply because it is different. Chickering himself also participates in these accusations to a certain extent: “For fidelity to both the letter and spirit of the original, it is a resounding but mixed success, with some awkward missteps amid many fine poetic achievements” (Chickering, *Heaneywulf*, 162). Chickering’s primary point of contention with Heaney’s translation is that it lies too far into the realm of paraphrase. Translators like Heaney and Morgan “translate sense for sense, rather than word for word” (Chickering, *Heaneywulf*, 161). Chickering also attributes the “individuality” of Heaney’s translation as actually resulting from the negative attention critics initially placed on it. This said, he cautions against taking any one translation as too definitive, arguing that because students of Old English will continue to be annoyed by translations they see as inadequate, “*Beowulf* will go on being newly translated for the foreseeable future” (Chickering, *Heaneywulf*, 179).

A ready example of the differences between these three translations and the types they represent can be found in how they begin the poem.

Listen! We have heard / of the glory of the Spear Danes
in the old days, / the kings of tribes--
how noble princes / showed great courage!
(Chickering, *Beowulf*, lines 1-3)

Chickering follows both the form and the meaning of the original Old English to the letter.

How that glory remains in remembrance,
Of the Danes and their kings in days gone,
The acts and valour of princes of their blood!
(Morgan lines 1-3)

Morgan has omitted the *scop*’s “*Hwaet*” and the Old English caesuras entirely. In addition, the reference to “days” has been moved to the second line when it is certainly in the first line in the

original. Finally, Morgan has given us examples where the original poet assumed the examples to be inferred. When the original poet said that the princes “showed great courage,” it was assumed that the audience would have in their minds preexisting notions of what that meant. Morgan has told us what it means: acts of blood and valor.

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.
(Heaney lines 1-3)

Heaney has maintained the subject structure by keeping “Spear-Danes” in line one, “kings” in line two, and “princes” in line three. He has, however, loosely translated “*Hwæt*” as “So.” Further, he has added punctuation to line two and removed the exclamation from line three. Overall, Heaney’s translation bears more resemblance to Chickering’s translation than to Morgan’s, at least structurally, but Heaney’s diction and details are certainly paraphrased.

A similar pattern of distinctions can be made during lines 703-711, Grendel’s arrival at Heorot.

Now in the night
the dark walker came / gliding in shadow;
the bowmen slept / who were to hold
the gabled hall / -all but one.
It was known to men / that the demon could not
drag them into shadows / when God did not wish it.
And Beowulf, wakeful, / on watch for the foe,
Angrily awaited / the outcome of battle
Then up from the marsh, / under misty cliffs,
Grendel came walking; / he bore God’s wrath.
(Chickering, *Beowulf*, lines 703-711)

Just as before, Chickering includes the caesuras, alliteration, most of the diction and punctuation of the original. The syntax has been altered slightly in places from the Old English, but these changes have been made to ensure readability.

Gliding at midnight

Came the gloomy roamer. The soldiers were sleeping-
 Those who were guarding the gabled building-
 All except one. Men well knew
 That that malefactor in the forbidding of the Creator
 Was powerless to draw them down beneath the shades;
 But he, wide awake with heart-pent fury
 And anger for the ravager, awaited fight's fortune.
 Now by the swirling bluffs from his wasteland
 Grendel came stalking; he brought God's wrath.
 (Morgan lines 703-711)

The reason for showing the entirety of this passage until the end punctuation is due mostly to Morgan's tendency to switch lines and information around within blocks that are punctuated.

The gabled hall is now a gabled building and is referenced in line 705 instead of 706; the soldiers are sleeping in line 704 instead of 705, and lines 707 and 708 have had the reference to God moved up a line and paired with a description of Grendel.

Then out of the night
 came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift;
 the hall guards were slack, asleep at their posts,
 all except one; it was widely understood
 that as long as God disallowed it,
 the fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.
 One man, however, was in fighting mood,
 Awake and on edge, spoiling for action.
 In off the moors, down through the mist band
 God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
 (Heaney lines 703-711)

Here Heaney keeps a similar sentence structure to Chickering's. While his exact diction varies, Heaney takes few liberties in this passage, save that of adding punctuation twice and substituting Irish colloquialisms for Modern English.

The differences between these translations, both great and small, serve to make each translation give its own version of events. Take line 711 for example. The Old English is "Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær;" (Chickering, *Beowulf*, line 711), which Chickering translates literally as "Grendel came walking; / he bore God's wrath" (Chickering, *Beowulf*, line 711).

From this, the reader sees Grendel walking towards Heorot, under the burden of God's vengeance. Chickering presents Grendel as a more human character than one might expect, because "he bore God's wrath" implies that Grendel understands his place in the order of things, rather than rebelling against it. In Morgan's translation, "Grendel came stalking; he brought God's wrath." This Grendel is some sort of dark agent of divine retribution, a far cry from the subordinate and burdened Grendel of Chickering. Heaney plays with the line structure: "God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping" (Heaney 711). Heaney's Grendel is cursed by God and certainly evil. However, in contrast to Chickering's Grendel, this one is more beast than man. He is loping like a rabid dog as he comes towards Heorot, and he is greedily hungry, violating two of the seven deadly sins. Despite the fact that all these characters are named Grendel, from this one line it is obvious that their natures are substantially different. In each translation Beowulf defeats Grendel, but the three versions (Beowulf defeating a humanlike put-down Grendel, Beowulf defeating a God-sent challenge Grendel, and Beowulf defeating Grendel the raving demonic beast) drastically change the reader's perception of events. The fact that these three stories are distinct is apparent even from one line.

Remembering that there is an individual behind any work is the key to understanding it. Whether it be *scop*, playwright, novelist, director, or author, the person telling a story has a reason for doing it and his or her own way to accomplish it. The desire to tell stories and to convey experiences is one part of being human, and that point connects us with some nameless poet in England over one thousand years ago.

Works Cited

Copeland, Rita. *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Chickering, Howell D. *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977.

--- "Beowulf and 'Heaneywulf'." *The Kenyon Review* Winter 2002: 160-179.

Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

Morgan, Edwin. *Beowulf. A Verse Translation into Modern English*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1952. Rpt. in *Medieval English Literature*. J. B. Trapp, Douglas Gray, Julia Boffey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

Robinson, Fred C. Reviewed work(s): *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays* by Robert P. Creed. *Speculum*, 45.2 (Apr., 1970): 283-289. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2851551>

Trapp, J.B., Douglas Gray, Julia Boffey. *Medieval English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002