

INTRODUCTION

ELAINE TREHARNE

THE OLD ENGLISH poem known as *Beowulf* was committed to writing in around the year 1010, somewhere in southern England. It has no title in the manuscript, and existed, unnoticed, until the early modern period. No one knows *who* wrote it, and no one knows *when* it was composed, though it is certainly earlier than the manuscript in which it is extant, since errors of copying are apparent in that text. It may have circulated as part of the oral tradition, spoken aloud to multiple audiences in, potentially, many variant forms. It has been assumed throughout the scholarly tradition that it was created by a male author or authors, but there is no actual proof that this was the case.

Beowulf survives in one manuscript: London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Part II—the *Beowulf* or Nowell Codex. The poem takes up folios 129–198, and is written by two scribes¹ who divide it into forty-three fitts or chapters, which are indicated in the manuscript, and in the translation that follows, by capital Roman numerals. The manuscript was damaged in a fire at Ashburnham House, London, in October 1731, where it formed part of the extensive collection of manuscripts and charters that belonged to the antiquary and scholar, Sir Robert Cotton.² Now, the edges of the manuscript are damaged, and the whole volume is found with each leaf secured within a card frame, all of which are bound into a large volume that also includes a twelfth-century book, known as the Southwick Codex.

Alongside *Beowulf* in the earlier part of the bound volume are four other extant texts, including the poetic *Judith*, and the prose pieces *The Life of St Christopher*, *The Marvels of the East*, and the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. The poem's eleventh-century manuscript context thus places it alongside texts that highlight 'other people', in addition to depicting various kinds of wonder and monstrosity; each text focuses in some way on encounter and transformation. In these various lights, *Beowulf* can be seen as illuminating multiple major themes about humanity, such as man's insatiable desire for

1 The complete manuscript of London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Parts I and II, is available Open Access in both of the following: *The Electronic Beowulf* by Kevin Kiernan, itself a landmark publication in Digital Humanities, and now available in fourth edition here: <http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/>; and the online digitization of the manuscript at the British Library's website here: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Vitellius_A_XV&index=1. The bibliography of *Beowulf* is very extensive; a selection of books and articles is offered at the end of this volume. Foliation methods differ. At the British Library, *Beowulf* is folios 132–201.

2 On this fire, and on Sir Robert Cotton, see Eileen A. Joy, 'Thomas Smith, Humfrey Wanley, and the "Little-Known Country" of the Cotton Library', *Electronic British Library Journal* (2005): 1–34; and Andrew Prescott, "'Their Present Miserable State of Cremation": The Restoration of the Cotton Library', in C. J. Wright, ed., *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy* (London: British Library Publications, 1997), pp. 391–454, and now available here: http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeo_archives/articles90s/ajp-pms.htm

power and fame; the futility of conflict; and good versus evil; as well as offering depictions of a diverse creation existing in the world simultaneously, whether in the centre or on the periphery. The poem and these other texts are as interesting and crucial to students and scholars now in the twenty-first century as they must have been to the two scribes who wrote the manuscript in the early eleventh century.³ It's likely that these texts were circulating even earlier than that, composed and performed in forms that are now lost to us.

The history of *Beowulf* is well-studied and the bibliography on the poem outweighs almost the rest of Old English Literature put together. It is read in translation in many high schools, and undergraduates and graduates in English Departments often come across the poem as part of literary survey classes. The text, or core parts of it, exists in all manner of translation and adaptation, from oral recitation to film to novel to comic book to children's picture book to cartoon to graphic novel to dozens of translations.⁴ The vast majority of these translations are by male academics, and *Beowulf* has seemed to become some kind of testing ground for many scholars in the field of Old English Studies. Some of the best-known translations are those by Kevin Crossley-Holland, Seamus Heaney, and Roy M. Liuzza.⁵ Women translators are far fewer, and include Ruth P. M. Lehmann, Marijane Osborne, Meghan Purvis, and, most recently, Maria Dahvana Headley.⁶

Beowulf By All, then, is the first ever *community* translation of this lengthy, canonical poem, which, following Kiernan's *Electronic Beowulf*, is numbered at 3184 lines, as opposed to the 3182 lines usually seen in scholarly editions. *Beowulf by All* was conceived in early 2016 by Elaine Treharne to make a small contribution to counter a time of fracture in Early English Studies, caused by a number of male academics, whose

3 Contemporary reflections on *Beowulf* are illustrated by Mary Rambaran-Olm's comments in her article, 'Anglo-Saxon Studies, Academia, and White Supremacy', in *Medium* (June, 2018): <https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3>. See also Asa Simon Mittman, 'Are the "Monstrous Races" Races?', *postmedieval*, 6.1 (2015), 36–51, and, indeed, the whole volume of *postmedieval* 6.1, edited and introduced by Cord Whitaker, *Making Race Matter in the Middle Ages* (2015); Breann Leake, Micah Goodrich, and Mary-Rambaran Olm, eds., *postmedieval* 11.3, *Race, Revulsion and Revolution* (Fall, 2020); and Kathleen Forni, *Beowulf's Popular Afterlife in Literature, Comic Books, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2018).

4 Britt Mize at Texas A&M University has a long-term project to itemize and classify all the translations, variant versions, adaptations, and 'after' works of *Beowulf*. His preliminary database is available at beowulf.dh.tamu.edu and includes translations and works centred on the text in multiple languages.

5 Kevin Crossley-Holland and Charles Keeping, *Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999); Roy M. Liuzza, *Beowulf* (Peterborough, Ontario and New York: Broadview, 1999).

6 Ruth P. M. Lehmann, *Beowulf: An Imitative Translation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988); Marijane Osborn, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Meghan Purvis, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (London: Pinned in the Margins, 2013). Maria Dahvana Headley, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (MCD x FSG Originals, 2020), is an exciting and moving modern translation of the Old English. See also Elaine Treharne, *Old and Middle English Anthology: 890–1450*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), which contains a third of the poem; the fourth edition of the Anthology might contain the whole poem.

comments and agenda were and are elitist, exclusionary, misogynistic, often racist, and anti-feminist. Reaching out to the community of early medievalists at all levels and in all countries, the idea behind the project was to create something good that included anyone who wanted to participate: a non-hierarchical, radical contribution to a more representative Old English Studies. Billed as a potentially nameable *BADASS Beowulf* project (completed By All Dedicated Anglo-Saxonist Scholars), this community project, where everyone was invited to contribute translations of fifteen-line sections of *Beowulf*, was intended to form a new, capacious version of the poem. It really has done that, as readers will experience; furthermore, we now invite our readers to participate in making their own translations—and space has been left opposite the translation for you to do just that.

Our instructions in the email sent to interested parties, whom we engaged through various major social media outlets, were as follows:

Thank you for joining in this ridiculous project!

With your lines, I've assigned you a straightforward fifteen-line section, which means the lines fall as [00–00]. These will be yours, if that's ok? I hope they're good lines! Syntax and sense units don't count for beginnings and endings of sections; edited lines are guiding the divisions here. All our segues between contributions will need close attention once all sections are in. Other rules of engagement might be that:

1. it should be a fairly 'traditional' translation, close to the OE but idiomatic (or something like that) completed within a couple of months;
2. someone will check yours, and you can check someone else's, too;
3. we'll use the online Kevin Kiernan edition as our preference.

Treharne settled on fifteen lines per contributor to enable as many as possible to participate, and allowing for a 'chunk' of text.⁷ With just these instructions as guidance, we were thrilled to see the diversity of submission: we did not establish the form of translation as poetry or prose; and other than 'traditional' (to avoid too *avant-garde* a rendition), translators were free to choose their preferred method of rendering the Old English. Some participants composed prose translations, some alliterative verse; some adhered very closely to the Old English, others are more liberal; some have clearly revelled in the creation of poetic neologisms, others in adhering to etymologically proximate lexis. The concatenation is deliberate: it is exciting, dynamic, stylistically disparate and challenging, but so fascinating and enjoyable to read. It is also occasionally jarring

⁷ Treharne had previously captured *Beowulf* in 100 Tweets when publishing #Beow100 on Twitter. There, over a month in 2014, each thirty-line segment was condensed and published into a mere 140 characters, which proved very tricky; see <https://texttechnologies.stanford.edu/news/beowulf-hundred-tweets-beow100>. It is the thirty-line segment there, though, that gave rise to the idea of fifteen lines per translator for *Beowulf By All*.

and fragmenting, but the reader is asked to consider the Old English and its demands: it is often through the effort of translating that we hear the tenor and see the reality of the original. Each section of text has been checked for accuracy and fluidity; each has also been read a number of times in conjunction with the congruent sections to ensure the segues make sense, even when their forms shift. The whole has been read and checked by the editorial team, through successive consultations with the contributors; and all contributors have had the opportunity to read, comment upon, and use the whole unpublished poem while it was in draft form online, and subsequently as a draft PDF in classroom settings. Peer reviewers have had the pleasure of reading the poem in its entirety and have offered improvements. They commented on *Beowulf By All's* liveliness, meticulous attention to the Old English, intelligibility, and originality.

We are absolutely delighted to publish here undergraduates, Old English seminar groups, individual graduate students, early career scholars, independent scholars, librarians, senior scholars, colleagues in mid-career, retired colleagues, archivists, outraged medievalists, and many who did Old English once-upon-a-time and who relished the challenge of translating a section. A small number of participants helped us out by taking on additional sections of the poem. Thank you to every single person who contributed to this fabulous publication: this real effort to bring people together in pursuit of a common goal of community-building. We hope all readers appreciate the results of this huge cast's labour. The text has already been taught successfully in a number of university classrooms—testimony both to the power of the poem itself and its attraction and usefulness for scholars to this day. This project teaches us that the earliest English, with its seemingly antiquated themes and sociocultural background, still offers excitement, interest, and the potential for all to participate on an equal footing. We hope that the translation's new physical and on-line iteration in workbook form provides an extra level of utility for future generations of scholars.

Citation Practice

If you are a contributor, to cite this work, begin with your own name, the lines translated, and acknowledgement of the volume, *Beowulf by All: Community Translation and Workbook*; for example, "Leonora Long, lines 155–170, *Beowulf by All: Community Translation and Workbook*, ed. Jean Abbott and Elaine Treharne with Mateusz Fafinski (Arc Humanities Press, 2021)".