OLD ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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The remarks above have described how *Beowulf By All* began with a widely-disseminated call for contributions, proceeded with intentionally open-ended instructions to translators, and has been edited according to a policy aimed, above all, at preserving the project's layers of polyvocality. The summation of all of this work is not only a unique translated object, but also an invaluable window on the act of translation itself. Here, my aim is to briefly explore the stakes, challenges, and rewards to be found in any Old English translation. In the process, I also hope to show why this polyvocal, crowdsourced project is a particularly fitting addition—a necessary one, even—to the amply-populated and ever-growing shelf of *Beowulf* translations.

Translation of any kind involves certain basic decisions, such as how literally the words of the original text should be rendered or how the style of one's writing might be modified to fit with the tone of the source. In addition to these more universal concerns, Old English (like every language) presents the would-be translator with its own particular collection of challenges. Arguably the most profound of these is simply the overwhelming distance separating today's readers from Old English speakers. How can we possibly fully comprehend the trappings, customs, and experiences of lives lived over a thousand years ago—much less translate them into our own language? With Old English translation, the difficulty of accessing the distant past puts a distinctly medieval spin on one of the most fundamental choices faced by any translator: should they give their audience a smoother reading experience by glossing over what is unfamiliar about the text, or should they try to preserve the text's original details at the expense of legibility? As we walk through some of the typical technical problems inherent in Old English translation, this ongoing tug-of-war between preservation and legibility will be evident throughout. Realistically, most translators will forge a path somewhere between these two extremes as they negotiate their own unique rendition of the original material. In the end, the way in which a translator handles such decisions will depend on how unfamiliar, strange, and challenging—or not—they believe a particular medieval text should feel to modern readers. There is no right answer to this question, but only, as *Beowulf By All* amply shows, a multitude of possibilities.

Lexicon

Producing a translation involves far more than simply changing out the words of one language for those of another; however (as any language learner can attest) even the process of finding the 'correct' word to translate a given concept presents a conundrum in its own right. This is as true for Old English-to-Modern English translations as it is for translations in any other language, although the modern version of English did evolve from the medieval one and still retains quite a few similarities. These similarities are

especially obvious in words that refer to objects, concepts, and actions that remain as relevant today as they were a thousand years ago—words such as *stan* ('stone'), *boc* ('book'), *fot* ('foot'), and *sunu* ('son'), and many pronouns (e.g., *we*, *he*, etc.). While these similarities can be useful, the downside to translating between such closely-related languages is that we also encounter a large number of 'false friends'; that is, words that look or sound like they should mean the same thing but actually do not. For example, the Old English adjective *wod* looks as though it might mean 'wood' or 'wooden', but in reality, *wod* refers to a state of furious anger or insanity (*wudu* is the word that actually refers to a forest or to wooden materials). Trickier still are those words that I would characterize as something like 'fair weather friends'. Unlike *wod*, which means something unambiguously different than 'wood', these words *can* mean something quite similar to their Modern English cousins, but they also have meanings that their modern cousins do not. The Old English *dom*, for instance, looks like it ought to mean—and actually *is* the etymological ancestor of—'doom'; however, it more typically means 'judgement'. Yet, there are contexts in which it *does* mean 'doom' (at least in the older sense of 'doom' as one's ordained path or destiny), and many more in which it refers to a 'judgement' that happens to be so negative that we might describe it as a 'doom' anyway. Words like this are especially malleable in the context of translating, where the most semantically *precise* word—the meaning listed in the dictionary or the answer an instructor might expect students to give on an exam—is not always the best fit for a specific translation. 'Doom', for instance, may not be the most technically accurate translation of *dom* in many contexts, but it is a wonderfully compact, ominous-sounding word that, for many translators, offers a better stylistic option than the more complex, clipped syllables of 'judgement'. Because of this, among the staggering variety of word choices made by our translators, readers will find more than a handful of places where artistic license enables us to stretch beyond the 'expected' definition of a given word.

The challenges posed by Old English 'false' or 'fair weather' friends differ greatly depending on the language used by a given translator, but there are also plenty of lexical items that have no easy equivalents in *any* modern language. A useful example for illustrating this difficulty is *eorl*, which appears throughout *Beowulf* and thus has been translated by quite a few of our translators here. *Eorl* can denote a specific high-ranking status held by a class of landowning men, but in *Beowulf*, it refers to a man more generally, with connotations of being brave or a leader (often in the context of fighting) and perhaps having high or noble social status.[1] It is important to note that an *eorl* is not the same thing as a Modern English 'earl', though the words are etymologically related: an *eorl* held a position in early medieval English society predating the Norman Conquest that began in 1066, while an 'earl' is a specific rank equivalent to that of a count in the British peerage system, which evolved in the years after 1066. Because we no longer live within the power structures that created the label of *eorl*, nor adhere to the same social standards and cultural expectations that would have influenced an *eorl*'s

1 My definition here is based on the one given in the glossary of *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

identity and behavior, *eorl* simply does not exist anymore in the same way that it did in early medieval England. With no modern equivalent at hand, each translator must balance between finding the word that fits best with their own interpretation of the story, while also keeping in mind the cultural baggage that Modern English terms themselves can bring to the table. For example, one common translation of *eorl* is 'noble', a word in which most modern readers will see connotations of high status, connections to the ruling class, and perhaps even men who lead during battle. But, for readers familiar with courtly knights and Arthurian legends, this word may also bring with it (extremely anachronistic) images of knights fighting in tournaments while clad in plate armor or vying for an unattainable maiden's affections. Many translators opt to keep the original sound and feel of the word by translating it as 'earl'. For readers knowledgeable in Old English (or willing to look it up), this can be a far more literally accurate word, and nearly all readers will understand, in general, that this is an individual of high status; however, this also runs the risk that the audience will mistakenly equate *eorl* with the more familiar post-Norman Conquest 'earls'. Faced with the difficulty of conveying high status without assigning a specific rank in modern terms, many translators go in a completely different direction: they start afresh with a less descriptive word such as 'man', relying on context (and sometimes even adding extra adjectives or phrases) to convey further details and, in the process, avoiding the need to sift through layers of misleading connotations.

The quest to find just the right word to express an unfamiliar, culturally-specific concept in a new language can be one of the most intellectually invigorating parts of translating Old English, as well as the most frustrating. Though translators must keep in mind a range of possible meanings for a given word in order to avoid making outright errors, within these parameters, there *is* no objectively 'correct' word to use—just the one a translator judges to be the best fit in a given context. And in some cases, even Old English experts are unable to agree on what the acceptable range of meanings for a given word ought to be. In *Beowulf*, the word *aglæca* is a particularly infamous example of this: most of the occurrences of this word refer to the monstrous foes against whom Beowulf fights, yet, occasionally, it also refers to the poem's human heroes. This has led scholars to ponder whether *aglæca* carries monstrous or negative connotations, whether it may be a more neutral descriptor denoting something like strength or intent to fight, or whether it may encompass multiple monstrous and non-monstrous dimensions. For better or worse, the more obscure a word's meaning is, the more scope it leaves for a translator to fill in the missing pieces with their own imagination—or not, if they prefer to preserve a sense of mystery. The blank pages opposite our translation allow readers to experiment for themselves.

I must also pause here to acknowledge the harmful potential that this same imaginative scope can have, particularly when translators seek the 'right' word in the wrong places. Among other things, the idea of *Beowulf* as the relic of an 'ancient warrior culture' (as the poem has historically been lauded) has led more than one translator to cast about for more modern 'warrior cultures' from whom to borrow more descriptive terminology. In cases such as these, we must always keep in mind the difference between writers, artists, and translators who, in various ways, make *Beowulf* their own—indeed,

there have been innumerable successful cross-cultural adaptations of this poem—and those who appropriate culturally-specific concepts and linguistic features that are not their own in order to create a certain effect. The latter has resulted not simply in translations that are inaccurate or misleading, but in actively harmful misrepresentations that are built on (and work to further propagate) stereotypes, racist viewpoints, and other insidious misbeliefs. Here, we have done our utmost to ensure that such language has no place in our translation.

Amidst these lexical conundrums, but also a concern of poetic style and tone in its own right, is the question of how to translate the multitude of compound words found in Old English, which are often called 'kennings'. Take the compound *hron-rad*, for instance. The standard dictionary definition of this term is very obviously 'sea' or 'ocean', but the two parts of the compound literally mean 'whale-road'. To translate this word as 'sea' leaves out the delightful built-in image of traveling along a highway of whales (as I like to envision it); to translate it as 'whale-road' or 'whale's road', though, forces the reader momentarily out of the story's action in order to think through the compound's meaning, possibly even necessitating a footnote to ensure full legibility. A similar decision must be made when translating any number of other types of figurative and poetic language. Another such choice confronted by a great many of our translators here is whether to preserve the many instances of metonymy embedded into the lexicon of *Beowulf*. Like *hron-rad*, words such as *æsc* and *ecg* often can be translated quite straightforwardly as 'spear' and 'sword' (respectively) when we encounter them in the context of battles and armor. However, their literal meanings are 'ash' (as in the type of wood used to *make* spears) and 'edge' (as in the *part* of the sword that can be used to slash at an enemy). A careful reading of the translations below, and especially one conducted in consultation with the Old English text, will reveal a rich spectrum of strategies for dealing with these and many other types of figurative language—all of which lead to reading experiences that differ in subtle and engaging ways, and offer varied pathways for readers' own translations to take.

Though there are plenty of other aspects of *Beowulf*'s lexicon and figurative language to be discussed, not to mention countless decisions that must be made at the level of phrases and sentences, I must leave reader and translator to discover these on their own. For those unfamiliar with the Old English language, I would recommend keeping an eye out for difference in general—things like a five-word Old English line that somehow stretches to twenty words in Modern English, or places where the Old English text repeats a word, but where there is no repetition in the translation. Such points of differences can be interesting in and of themselves, but they also tend to mark Old English words and phrases that are likely to repay further research—even a quick peek at a dictionary or glossary—quite richly.

Prose and Verse Form

On a more global scale, one of the single most impactful choices facing each *Beowulf By All* translator is whether to work in prose or in verse. Though *Beowulf* itself was written in verse, there actually are many good reasons why a translator may opt to recast it in

prose. When a translator wishes to prioritize fidelity to the original wording and phrasing—something that can be especially useful for Old English language learners—it is far less awkward to do so in prose, rather than trying to cram an unwieldy Modern English phrase into a single line of verse or (what tends to happen less often) stretch a naturally concise Modern English translation to fit certain metrical or stylistic requirements. A prose translation does not give free rein to be as wordy as possible, at least not if the translator also wants readers to enjoy their work; however, it does allow for a freer hand and the greatest number of possible options. Of course, there are also considerations beyond practicality that can recommend translation into prose. Much like translating a complex term such as *eorl* into the more generic 'man', translating *Beowulf* in prose can function as a tacit acknowledgment that *no* Modern English poetic form can deliver precisely the same reading experience as the original Old English metre. More importantly, prose translations can simply be a matter of taste and style; they are certainly capable of producing a beautiful, enjoyable reading experience every bit as much as verse translations are capable of producing a functional one.

Before considering the impact of verse translations, and also in order to better understand some of the stylistic choices made in prose translations, it will be useful to have a working knowledge of how the original poetry functions. The precise rules and mechanisms underlying Old English metre are still a matter of debate among scholars, but the basic form is straightforward enough. The first thing to realise is that we 'count out' a line of Old English poetic metre in stresses (or points of greatest emphasis), rather than syllables, as readers familiar with Shakespeare or even Chaucer might expect. Each line of Old English poetry consists of two half-lines, and each half-line contains two primary points of stress; added together, that gives us a total of four stresses for each full line. Finally, between the two half-lines is a pause (usually indicated in modern editions with a large blank space or sometimes a vertical bar) known as a *caesura*. These 'stresses' do not refer to the syllables that are stressed in each and every word; instead, they are the overall points of stress at the level of the phrase or sentence. For example, when I say the sentence 'Shakespeare wrote beautiful poetry', while each word has its own individual stress patterns, I put the two main stresses in the sentence as a whole on 'Shake-' and 'beau-'. Of course, these stress patterns can vary from person to person and in different contexts (I might insist to a disbelieving listener that Shakespeare *wrote* poetry, rather than, say, stealing it). Likewise, there are cases in which we are not quite certain where all of the primary stresses fall in a line of Old English verse, though there are plenty of other rules and patterns that help to clarify these stress patterns in the vast majority of cases. For one thing, certain types of words are regularly stressed more than others: nouns, for instance, are usually stressed more than verbs, and 'content' words such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives are stressed more than 'function' words such as prepositions.

But the biggest factor in determining a line's primary stresses lies in the other defining characteristic of Old English verse: alliteration, or the use of the same sound at the beginning of words. Within a given line, at least two of the four major stresses are supposed to alliterate with one another, and one of these alliterating stresses must occur in *each* of the two half-lines, thus providing a connection between them, as seen here in lines 710–714 of the poem, literally translated:

> Đa com of more under misthleoþum
> Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær;
> mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
> sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.
>
> Then from the moor, under the misty slopes
> Grendel came walking, bearing God's anger;
> he intended, the evildoer, of a certain human
> to ensnare in the high hall.

It should be noted, as suggested above, that the manuscript (as with *all* Old English poetry) does not lay out the lines like this; rather, Old English poetry is written out in long lines, as if it were prose. At folio 148r of the *Beowulf*-manuscript, these lines are written out like so:

> Đa com of more under mist hleoþum gren
> del gongan, godes yrre bær mynte
> se manscaða manna cynnes sumne be
> syrwan in sele þam hean[2]

Editors from the nineteenth century, influenced by the layout of later Middle English alliterative poetry, perhaps, decided to versify Old English into lines divided in the middle by a space that represents a natural pause, both halves being united by the alliterative scheme of the verseline. The overall effect of this verseline is a distinctive, measured, often drumbeat-like rhythm of stressed syllables, with varying numbers of unstressed or less stressed syllables interspersed among them. In the lines of the quotation, the alliterating sounds are i) **m**; ii) **g**; iii) **m**; iv) **s**, and each syllable that begins with that alliterating consonant is heavily stressed. One could characterise the resulting verse as both more and less regular-seeming than a syllabic metre like iambic pentameter. On the one hand, to readers who are used to carefully counting out individual syllables and the predictable heartbeat of iambic pentameter, the unpredictable spaces between primary stresses may seem hopelessly irregular. On the other hand, in contrast to the ways in which iambic pentameter can be shaped into a variety of phrases with all sorts of unpredictable sentence-level stress patterns (a feature that an expert like Shakespeare can use to surprise and delight their audiences), the regular four-part beat of Old English poetry proceeds with comforting steadiness—or ominous inevitability, as the case may be.

With these basic characteristics in mind, it is possible to begin observing where the verse translations below seem to emulate the Old English, where they diverge from it, and where the two approaches merge together in surprising blends of preservation and innovation. Some translators, then, have preserved the half-line form with a *caesura* in the middle of each line; more have loosely translated line by line, but without leaving a

2 See the manuscript, fully digitised, at the British Library Digitised Manuscripts website: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv_f094r

pause to mark half-lines; and a few have reshaped their sections into entirely different poetic forms. Overlapping verse form and lineation, we can also observe varying levels of alliteration. Where highly alliterative translations coincide with close, half-line by half-line forms, we are left with a translation that seems highly reminiscent of the original form; elsewhere, alliteration may provide a way for translators who do not closely follow the line-by-line form of the original to maintain at least one aspect of Old English verse in their renditions. Similar observations can be made about rhythm, tone, and all of the more subjective or less codified categories we might employ to analyse poetry; and, we must not forget, many of these categories may be relevant in thinking about the aesthetics of prose translations, as well.

Beowulf By All as a Translation

Old English translation, on any scale and for any audience, is the result of an infinitely variable synthesis of new and old, modern and medieval, and innovation and representation. And it is our hope that this volume will offer a fresh perspective on translation, in all its complexity, to readers of all backgrounds and levels of experience. For those new to the study of translation, in particular, *Beowulf By All* offers an ideal illustration of how each translator's choices work *together* to produce a coherent, distinctive reading experience. This experience is built partly on concrete factors such as the word choices, poetic devices, and prose and verse forms discussed above, and we hope that reading an edition of the Old English text alongside our translation will assist readers in pinpointing precisely where and how such choices take place.[3]

At the same time, beyond simply comparing the *same* passage across different translations, the sequential reading experience of *Beowulf By All* also encourages the reader to consider the less tangible effects that change from one translation to the next. What voice speaks to us in each new section? What mood, atmosphere, subtext, or feeling is it conveying to us along with its more overt form and substance? How might it be shaping and reshaping our own relationship with this text? As important as it is to understand concrete linguistic and stylistic choices and their possible consequences, we must also remember that the full impact of a translation surpasses the sum of its (many and sundry) parts. And no two translators will ever produce quite the same effect; like fingerprints, similar from a distance but utterly distinctive when actually examined, each translation inevitably bears the stamp of the individual who produced it. *Beowulf By All* both acknowledges and celebrates this reality, while also insisting on an equally inevitable corollary truth: the field of Old English translation will grow stronger, richer, and, in so many respects, better the more open and inclusive it becomes. Below, readers will encounter the voices of over 200 individuals, woven together into a reading experience that is at once productively dissonant, yet strangely coherent in its extreme variation. We hope that it leads us to turn the common question of 'Why do we need yet *another*

3 See, for example, the free online version by Benjamin Slade here: https://heorot.dk/beo-rede-f1.

translation?' on its head, asking instead, 'How can we hear from *more* translators?' and 'How can previously unheard, or marginalised voices, find space, like this, in the world of Old English Studies?'

With this in mind we invite readers to try their own hand at translating *Beowulf* in the pages provided opposite our community translation.