
In these days of fear and doubt, of repossessions and restructurings and budgetry reviews, there is one thing that no one need lack: a translation of *Beowulf* to suit them. As we learn at the start of the first chapter of this rich, detailed but also entertaining study, over the last century-and-a-half around forty verse translations of the poem have been published, and a larger number in prose. There are archaizing translations, modernizing translations, translations in rhyme, translations in blank verse, translations that mimic Old English classical metre, and even (quoted in its entirety on p. 219) Michael Alexander’s epitome of the poem in three limericks. It may seem odd, therefore, that the field is so utterly dominated at present by Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf* (1999); or perhaps not so odd, since Heaney is a poet of great celebrity and his translation was commissioned for that most influential and ubiquitous of anthologies, the Norton, and subsequently aggressively marketed in a variety of other formats. In academic Old English studies Heaney’s version has excited strong opinions and an unprecedented volume of comment: a recent (February 2012) collection from the University of Michigan’s Medieval Institute, *‘Beowulf’ at Kalamazoo: Essays on Translation and Performance* (ed. Jana K. Schulman and Paul E. Szarmach), dedicates one of its three parts entirely to reviews of Heaney. By its vigorous appropriation (adulteration?) of the poem and its very dominance, ‘Heaneywulf’ has attracted some sharp critical barbs. Hugh Magennis is, broadly speaking, pro-Heaney; but this book puts Heaney’s *Beowulf* in context as only one of four main case studies which are each carefully examined and evaluated in the light of translation theory and the character of the original. The other translations to be given chapter-length treatments are those of Edwin Morgan (1952), Burton Raffel
(1963), and Michael Alexander (1973: the full length version, not the limericks). There are also surveys of earlier translations and of post-1950 verse renderings, in chapters three and eight, respectively.

Translations can have different purposes and be aimed at different audiences. A theme that recurs through the book is the relationship between the place of *Beowulf* in the academy, especially on undergraduate courses, and the desire to bring it to a wider audience. The prose translations are generally stimulated by the needs of teaching and scholarship. Verse translations make more of a claim to be works of art in their own right. However, Magennis emphasizes the translator’s responsibility to represent the original text, above all its poetry: ‘To the extent that the original of *Beowulf* is accessible to scholarly study and appreciation...I would insist from my Anglo-Saxonist perspective that a key function of its verse translations is to convey a sense of the poetry of the original’ (7).

Accordingly, Chapter Two is crucial, because it is here that Magennis offers an account of the *Beowulf*-poet’s art. The account rests on a view of the poem as at once traditional and individual, employing a language and narrative materials rooted in oral culture but looking back on the heroic world from a distance and using it as a vehicle for meditation on human experience. Although Magennis suggests an early or fairly early rather than a late date for the poem — ‘perhaps two or three centuries earlier’ than the manuscript (28), he presents it as a literate work that makes use of the trope of oral delivery: ‘The *Beowulf* poet adopts the stance of the *scop* but in fact this narrator and this audience are a fiction’ (31). The passage describing the *scop’s* performance following Beowulf’s victory over Grendel (ll. 867b–74) is one of two passages (the other is ll. 1–11) that are used for close examination of the language, noting manipulations of the metrical structure, the use of formulae and of poetic vocabulary, symmetry and wordplay, and
contrasts between the passages that bring out the poet’s flexibility. Again, the keynote is the ‘interplay between individuality and tradition’ (31): for example, Magennis notes that ‘the Beowulf poet is tapping into the rich ready-made resources provided by the poetic tradition. It is also notable, however, that some of the phrases that recur in the poem are not found in other surviving poems’ (35). Chapter two is the shortest, but not only is it central to the argument but it has obvious relevance beyond the book’s immediate project: it is easy to envisage setting this chapter as introductory reading on undergraduate Beowulf courses. It offers a precise, assured, beautifully clear account of the poem’s technique in brief compass; the approach is conservative but none the worse for it.

The theoretical frame for the assessment of the translations has been set out in Chapter One. The major idea Magennis uses is Lawrence Venuti’s distinction between ‘domesticating’ and ‘foreignizing’ translation: translation that aims to bring the text to the reader, making it accessible, versus translation that requires the reader to accommodate to the text by insisting on its strangeness and difference. (I had come across Venuti before, but was not aware until reading this that his approach was in many respects anticipated in 1813 by the philosopher F. E Schleiermacher.) The ‘domesticating’ strategy is sometimes seen, following Venuti, as an imperialistic venture that colonizes and appropriates the source text. However, in practice it can be hard to draw the line between the domesticating and the foreignizing. Some nineteenth-century renderings of Beowulf use consciously archaic language, and yet this is a species of domestication where that language is the conventional archaism of contemporary poetry. Again, as Magennis points out, any modern edition of an Old English poem already domesticates, providing modern letter-forms, page-layout, line-numbers, punctuation, annotation and so forth. In translation an element of domestication is inevitable, and the demands of accessibility weigh
alongside the demands of representing the poem. Versions such as Heaney’s ‘do not disregard accessibility but they suggest the otherness of *Beowulf*, an otherness that derives not only from its cultural remoteness but, within that remote culture, from the special traditional register of the poetry of *Beowulf*, which was both “familiar” and distinctively different from natural speech even in its own period’ (13).

The story of the earlier verse translations, set out in Chapter Three, is very much a story of the struggle with the otherness of *Beowulf*. Magennis brings out the interaction of several factors. One is the editing of the text and the initial work of scholarly comprehension, Thorkelin’s being the pioneering effort (1815) but Kemble’s the first to offer a sound text (1833). Another is the growing importance of *Beowulf* to conceptions of nationhood and the national past, which were central to Thorkelin’s and Kemble’s work; a section on the US notes the role of Anglo-Saxon antiquity in how Jefferson and others understood American identity. A third factor is the emerging appreciation of the poem’s literary qualities, which advanced uncertainly through the nineteenth century and was only really put on a firm footing by Tolkien: Magennis quotes J. R. Hall (1901) to the effect that *Beowulf* ‘sinks every now and then to the level of the dullest prose, and has the prolixity which is characteristic of a leisurely and primitive age’ (quoted p. 65); this recalls Joseph Ritson’s judgement more than a hundred years earlier that Old English verse was ‘a kind of bombast or insane prose, from which it is very difficult to be distinguished’ (quoted p. 42).

Even before Hall, however, the translations show a broad movement from domesticating towards more foreignizing strategies. Thorkelin translated into Latin — the authoritative language of Antiquity. Conybeare (1826) chose blank verse for his rendering of selected extracts. Wackerbath (1849) went for a rollicking rhyming verse form. James M. Garnett (1882) and Stopford Brooke (1892) were the first to
attempt, in different ways, forms more closely resembling that of *Beowulf* itself. The apogee of the foreignizing approach came in 1895 with William Morris's bizarre effort, which I find virtually unreadable. Magennnis is quite nice about it, at the culmination of a discussion that contextualizes it in Morris's saga translations: ‘it must be seen as a major artistic engagement with the Old English poem’ (61). Nonetheless, it is not until the second half of the twentieth century, when literary as opposed to historical and linguistic approaches to the poem really began to take off within the academy, that we find translations that can claim to be successful both as translations and as literature.

Edwin Morgan’s work thus emerges, despite the century-and-a-half of translations that preceded it, as something of a new departure. He was certainly entertainingly scornful of his predecessors. Morgan’s aim was to produce a rendering of *Beowulf* that would take its place in the world of contemporary poetry; despite being a Scottish poet at a time of vigorous cultivation of a distinctively Scots tradition and poetic language, the context in which and for which he wrote was English-language poetry in general. Magennis brings out the strengths of Morgan’s version, including vigorous rhythmical effects and a fresh and inventive vocabulary. However, he also gently but ruthlessly notes the ways in which Morgan departed from his stated principles, for example, by employing archaisms and poeticisms: the diction at times is ‘mannered’ or even ‘bathetic’. Morgan’s close attention to the original is evident in his use of cumulative sentence structures and of word-compounding. However, he makes significant changes to the narrative voice, largely losing the sense of a *scop* who speaks (notionally) to a listening audience in favour of a more impersonal perspective. This entails a ‘displacement of the poem from a world of tradition, …a tradition which the Old English poet had participated in and transcended, to a culture in which the poet writes as an individual for individual readers’ (98). Magennis finds
Morgan’s an uneven achievement, but he values it more highly than did many contemporary reviewers.

Burton Raffel was one of those unimpressed reviewers. Magennis suggests that many readers of Morgan’s version perhaps desired something less intricate of diction and more flowing in its narrative. Raffel certainly provides this in a translation characterized by its ‘boldness’ and its ‘narrative momentum’. From Raffel’s own essay in Yale Review Magennis adapts a phrase for the title of the chapter that sounds the keynote of Raffel’s approach: ‘Mastering the Original to Leave It’. Raffel’s Beowulf is exciting, direct, and clear; it simplifies complications such as the poem’s vast range of variable names (for example, the Spear-Danes, Ring-Danes, West-Danes etc. all appear as the Danes or Danish); in place of apposition, grammatical structures are streamlined into sentence forms more familiar in modern English, for example through the use of cumulative series of participles; modern idioms are sometimes used. The result is highly accessible but not much like Beowulf. The differences run deeper than the stylistic or, rather, Magennis brings out how changes in the poetic language have knock-on effects for the thematic level of the poem and for audience sympathies. In his close-reading of the translation of ll. 1–11 he shows how ‘Raffel presents Shild and the Danes as oppressors crushing the weak’, bringing out their ruthlessness rather than their triumph, which ‘only succeeds in emphasizing the otherness of the world of the poem in an unsympathetic way’ (129). This is one instance of how close examination of a translation can re-sensitize us to the qualities of the original. The foregrounding of the otherness of the poem’s world is, moreover, seemingly an unintended effect in a rendition that is in spirit domesticating. The domesticating strategy succeeded in producing a version that has proved very popular, especially with American college audiences, but ‘[t]he experience of
reading Raffel’s version is nothing like that of reading *Beowulf* itself’ (134).

My own only experience so far of teaching *Beowulf* in translation and not as part of an Old English course was with the translation addressed in the next chapter, that of Michael Alexander. This was at the University of St Andrews, where Michael Alexander taught for many years. It is a particularly useful version for teaching because it is both readable and scholarly. The apparatus — introduction, bibliography, genealogical tables, notes, map and index — is well-pitched and benefits from Alexander’s depth of learning, but the text escapes that strange half-alive quality that pervades the most literal translations from the Old English, though Alexander takes what Magennis calls an ‘imitative’ approach to the verse. Magennis shows how Alexander in places ‘fill[s] out the imagery of the original’ (155) but remains faithful to tone and finds an effective equivalent to *Beowulf*’s stylized but restrained diction. In the rendition of ll. 866–73 Magennis detects some wrong notes (for example, ‘*fellow*, *repertory* and *drove* all supply the requisite alliteration but are strained choices in the context’ [156]), and he judges that the translation as a whole ‘lack[s] the flashes of brilliance seen in other versions’ (159), but overall Alexander meets with warm approval. ‘Above all, it succeeds better than most other translations in conveying to the modern reader an enabling sense of what it is like to read *Beowulf* in the original today…while at the same time being written in convincing modern verse’ (159).

Alexander’s translation has an authority born of a deep sense of belonging both to the scholarly world which is the poem’s chief modern habitat and to the English cultural heritage that sees *Beowulf* as foundational. Heaney’s much-discussed version, however, overtly engages with its author’s problematic relationship to that heritage, and Magennis is not the first to analyse how Heaney (in a phrase from Conor
McCarthy) ‘write[s] his own roots into this foundational work’ (quoted, p. 164). He is, however, particularly well-placed to appreciate the extent to which the everyday idioms Heaney uses, as well as the occasional conspicuous Irishisms, are the stuff of Ulster vernacular: the translation ‘is more thoroughly and consistently Irish than many commentators appreciate’ (168). Heaney’s approach ‘complicate[s] the domesticating versus foreignizing binary’ (187) because, while it domesticates from Heaney’s own perspective (and from Magennis’s — see the Preface, p. vii), it foreignizes from the perspective of most readers who do not share his background. The influence of the Ulster vernacular produces a more low-key register for the poem than that of the Old English, transposing Beowulf to a world that is ‘smaller in scale…populated by down-to-earth people’ (188).

This is not to say that this version is without poetic brilliance or excitement. More recondite terms are used alongside the dialect vocabulary as well as compounds that convey ‘strikingly focused images’, often sharpening the sense of the original (172). If this precision of imagery recalls Edwin Morgan, as Magennis remarks, I am struck that other aspects of the analysis sound rather like what has been said about Raffel: for example, Heaney pursues ‘directness of utterance’ (179), and at times the vigour of his writing makes the original look ‘almost tame’ (p. 175). Yet, as was not the case with Raffel, Magennis finds that even when Heaney ‘has to move away from Old English syntax and style…he is still able, in doing so, to reflect and suggest features of the original’ (180). Perhaps most important among the features that Heaney reflects, and that Raffel and also Morgan do not, is the sense of the communal perspective of scop and audience, a perspective that in the translation emerges from the formulaic and conventional elements in the language (many examples are given on p. 168) and also the retention of the sense that the narrator speaks from a shared knowledge (‘we have heard…”).

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Chapter two has characterized the *Beowulf*-poet as one who both draws on tradition and transcends it; one could say the same of Heaney and the language and world of rural Ulster.

Following the four chapters on individual translations, Chapter Eight provides a brisk survey of other verse translations published after 1950, the most recent being Dick Ringler’s 2007 *Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery*. This chapter gives a strong impression of the range of purposes that have been pursued by translators of *Beowulf*; the interest in the oral-performance dimension is one significant development of the period. The standard is generally higher than it had been earlier, though some efforts are assessed as weak (Risden 1994) or crippling eccentrics (Tripp 1990). Liuzzo’s 2000 version is a highlight as, to my mind, is Raymond Oliver’s *Beowulf: A Likeness* (1983) which is not so much a translation as a recasting that ‘bring[s] aspects of *Beowulf* vividly to life and explore[s] its silences’ (204). An epilogue mentions still freer adaptations such as film versions and novels.

This is both a very enjoyable and a very scholarly book. It makes one want to read more both of *Beowulf* itself and of the translations discussed (though perhaps some of them more than others). As a sustained exercise in close reading it is exemplary. It is also animated throughout by a kindly spirit. Magennis is critical, sometimes extremely so, where criticism is due, but he also shows great sympathy to the aims and circumstances of the many people who in their different ways have struggled and striven with *Beowulf*: of Thorkelin, for example, he comments that he ‘is not properly equipped to edit and translate the poem but tries his best anyway’ (46). Much of this book consists in passing judgement, but it is judgement tempered with mercy.

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