

Translating Beowulf: Modern Versions in English Verse HUGH MAGENNIS

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What makes a good translation? Faithfulness to the original, or accessibility to the modern reader? These are the questions that concern Hugh Magennis in this fascinating study of modern poetic responses to Beowulf. While the focus is on major verse translations by Morgan, Raffel, Alexander and Heaney, there is much else to savour, not least Magennis's expert analysis of the language and style of the poem itself.

Chapter 1 provides a helpful discussion of translation theory, grounded in Venuti's distinction between "foreignizing" translations, which aim to convey the "otherness" of the target text, and "domesticating" translations, which value readability, though often at the expense of accuracy. For Magennis, "a good translation can enablingly provide for its readership a sense of what it is like to read the original" (p. 4), though he also emphasises that in order for a translation to work as modern verse, the author is "inevitably transforming the poem in the process" (pp. 4–6). Among early prose translations, Magennis gives due recognition to the pioneering work of Kemble (1837) and Thorpe (1855), who provided close, word-for-word renderings, and notes that while the more recent versions of Garmonsway (1968) and Bradley (1982) are of use to the student in providing "an appreciation of the surface meaning and content", they give "little sense of the feel of its poetry" (p. 21).

The poetry of Beowulf is itself the subject of Chapter 2, which emphasises the text's traditional qualities as well as its originality. In masterful close-readings of two key passages (ll. 1–11 and 867b774), Magennis provides a succinct summary of Old English poetic style, noting features such as orality and aurality, inventive alliteration and wordplay, the sense of "dignity and restraint" and the use of formulaic language in a "generative way" (p. 34). These same passages are used in subsequent chapters to compare each translator's approach to the "target text".

Chapter 3 surveys verse translations up to 1914, most of them hampered by poor understanding of Old English language and poetic style. Beowulf has long suffered from the misconception that it is of little artistic value, and best appreciated by small children. Hence the first full English verse translation, by Wackerbath in 1849, employs a ballad-like metre more suited to nursery rhyme than serious court literature. As Magennis demonstrates, finding the right register and metre for a modern version of Beowulf has been the stumbling block of translators down the ages: Lumsden's 1881 version opted for the style of medieval romance, while Brooke (1892) began the trend for attempting to convey something of the ancient, alliterative feel of the original. This medievalising approach reached its nadir in William Morris's 1895 version, in Magennis's frank

assessment a “lumbering oddity” (p. 57). The remainder of the chapter looks at the appropriation and adoption of Beowulf by English, British, German and Danish narratives of national identity. But as Magennis shows, the poem has found its widest audience in North America, where it has long been a staple of University courses. Indeed, the increasing demand for reliable and readable student versions of the poem has inspired the vast majority of verse translations.

Chapter 4 identifies Edwin Morgan’s 1952 poetic translation as a “key milestone in the history of Beowulf translation”, succeeding as modern verse while retaining “something of the flavour of the original poem” (pp. 81–2). So, for example, Morgan replaces the original communal, oral narrative voice with a more personal, literate one but retains a stress-based, alliterative metre and other stylistic features typical of Old English such as apposition and compound diction. Though Magennis detects the odd “wrong note”, on the whole he finds Morgan’s poem “sensitive and assured”, even “at times exciting” (pp. 104–07).

Burton Raffel, whose 1963 translation is the subject of Chapter 5, eschewed Morgan’s attempts to imitate the style of the original, aiming instead for clarity and accessibility. But Magennis carefully demonstrates how, in his pursuit of a “smooth and coherent narrative flow” (p. 115), Raffel produces a poem which is in many ways unlike Beowulf.

More to Magennis’s taste is Michael Alexander’s 1973 translation, more akin to Beowulf itself but also “a living poem” (p. 137). Noting Alexander’s debt to Pound’s *Seafarer*, in Chapter 6 Magennis provides plentiful examples of his deft employment of Old English poetic techniques in order to amplify and sharpen the original.

But the greatest praise is reserved for Heaney’s “revolutionary . . . experiment in cultural transformation” (pp. 162–63). Far the most popular modern translation, Heaney’s work has divided critics, some accusing him of cultural re-appropriation (Alexander) and linguistic snobbery (Shippey). Magennis vigorously defends Heaney’s use of his native Northern-Hiberno-English on the grounds that it provides “a texture of a vernacular in which traditional forms of speech reflect a traditional outlook on life” (p. 168). Some features criticised in the work of other translators, notably archaisms and other novel-sounding vocabulary, are more generously tolerated here: Heaney’s employment of HE *keshes*, OE *howe*, ON *graith* and Scots/UE *steadings* is either suggestive “of a past way of life” or evidence of his “ability to search out rare and interesting words” (pp. 169–70), while archaisms such as “hasped”, “hooped” and “looped” contribute to subtle rhythmic effects (p. 174). But Magennis persuasively demonstrates Heaney’s sensitivity to Old English poetic style, in particular his inventive use of compounding, arguing that at times he even improves on the work of his model.

The final chapter briefly surveys other post-1950 verse translations, the majority by scholar-poets rather than poet-scholars. In his Conclusion, Magennis observes the important role of translations in changing perceptions of the poem among general readers, bridging the academic and literary worlds. With this meticulously researched and elegantly written volume, the translators have found themselves a scholar worthy of their efforts. The author modestly suggests that his book will “make a small contribution” (p. 216) to the study of the poem’s reception. But *Translating “Beowulf”* will become essential reading not only for anyone brave enough to attempt a verse translation of Beowulf, but for all serious students of Old English poetry and its currency in the modern age.

There are very few typographical errors in the footnotes: on p. 66, n. 111, “identity” should read “identical”; “Beowulf” on p. 136, n. 7, and “*Strange Likeness*” on p. 166, n. 28, should be italicised.

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