

Beowulf: A Translation

Thomas Meyer

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Punctum Books—for those who are unfamiliar—is a recently established open-access and print-on-demand independent publisher. One of the founding principles of the organization is its commitment to the dissemination of creative intellectual works that span, and even ignore, traditional disciplinary conventions. In this respect, Thomas Meyer’s translation of *Beowulf* has found its perfect home. Meyer’s translation, which readily draws its inspiration from modernist poetry such as that written by Basil Bunting and Ezra Pound, has been aptly described as ‘avant-garde’, ‘hyper-visual’, and ‘adventurous’. These descriptions of the work are fitting, as Meyer’s poem is so inventive that without one’s awareness of *Beowulf*’s roots as a medieval Anglo-Saxon poem, upon encountering this bold new translation one might mistake it for a creative and original modernist work in its own right. Even the cover artwork of the translation has a mid-twentieth century air to it, with its silhouetted man falling from one inverted Norse longship to another—an image distinctly reminiscent of the title sequence to AMC’s 1960s period drama *Mad Men*. The image fits the translation well; the combination of iconic modernist-era imagery with medieval Norse iconography encapsulates the seamless amalgamation of the modern and the medieval exemplified by Meyer’s translation.

Before introducing readers to the translation proper, the edition begins with a preface by David Hadbawnik that discusses how the translation was acquired and acquaints the reader with some of the experimental aspects of the poem. It is interesting that Hadbawnik and others continually refer to Meyer’s work as a ‘translation’ (as have I up to this point) as Hadbawnik himself admits that Meyer takes “liberties and risks with the Old English verse in astonishing ways”.¹ Hadbawnik’s assessment in this respect is exceedingly accurate, and it is precisely because of these liberties that I am inclined to argue that Meyer’s poem is in fact more of an *adaptation* of *Beowulf* than a *translation*. Though Meyer adheres strictly to the original medieval text in many respects (such as his fidelity to the original’s narrative content), he moves vastly away from it in others—especially with regard to poetic form. Meyer’s work essentially seizes *Beowulf* from the medieval world of

¹ *Beowulf: A New Translation*, Thomas Meyer, 2.

oral Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse and reconstructs it within the realm of modernist visual poetry; in this way, the poet participates in an act of adaptation by bringing the text into a new cultural milieu. His poetic work does not limit itself to a rigid translation of *Beowulf*, but instead actively participates in a tradition of adaptation that can be traced directly back to the medieval period itself.² Those medievalists who typically have a difficult time with translations which stray too far from the original texts might prefer to approach Meyer's 'translation' with the medium of adaptation in mind.

Hadbawnik's preface is succeeded by an introduction from Daniel C. Remein, which does an excellent job of situating Meyer's work within *Beowulf's* long history of translation. Remein gives sufficient background to the original manuscript, relaying its origin and importance before moving on to discuss the text's first, and subsequent, translations, beginning in 1787. He then briefly addresses some of the critical discussions surrounding the text, including J.R.R. Tolkien's famous lecture, and the more contemporary placement of the poem within postmodern discourse. The next section of the introduction turns to the importance of topography in Meyer's translation, in congruence with the original poem. This section is especially important, as Meyer's work explicitly toys with notions of place through its visual as well as its narrative construction. The next section addresses some specifics of translation within Meyer's work, including its relationship to the Objectivist and Projective poetic traditions, before moving on to a section that relates specifically to the paleography of the *Beowulf*-typescript. Here, a very interesting discussion of the transition from oral to type-set poetry takes the fore as comparisons with Pound's poetry abound. This particular section espouses the importance of reading Meyer's work in its tangible, printed codex form; if one would rather read the free .pdf version available from Punctum Books, however, I would at the very least suggest reading the pages side by side on the screen.

Meyer's translation comprises the bulk of the text, divided into two parts; the first based on *Beowulf's* excursions 'oversea', and the second upon his return to the 'homelands'. Considering that modernist poetry can at times be disagreeably opaque to some aesthetic palates, Meyer's translation is surprisingly easy to follow. Though some passages may be confusing for untrained readers, the text as a whole is easily approachable. In fact, some phrases and passages in the text display an especially high level of imaginative brilliance, such as when the bodies of Danes are described as 'blood candy' to the monster Grendel.³ The text also succeeds in supplanting the

2 Although there is no evidence that *Beowulf* itself was ever copied and adapted after the eleventh century (as it survives in a single codex), it was common in the medieval period to do so with these types of works.

3 *Beowulf: A New Translation*, Thomas Meyer, 47.

oral repetition of the original and replacing it instead with aesthetic emphasis. For example, in oral presentation passages, such as the beginning of Fit Five, when the warriors are marching into the hall, instead of a bombastic oral account, Meyer presents a visually-charged image of marching words, progressing step by step down the page, thus achieving a similar effect for an audience whose familiarity with the written text is likely far in advance of their oral literacy. A similar effect is produced at the beginning of Fit Nine, when the text's depiction of the hacking of whale bellies is laid out to produce the visual effect of a whale carcass on the page. Perhaps one of the more interesting layout experiments is when the combat between Beowulf and Grendel is written out like the scene of a screenplay, with the character names set left and their actions set adjacent, like dialogue.⁴ The minimalist aspect of modernist poetry comes to the fore toward the end of the translation during Beowulf's final battle with the dragon. The episode is strung out across over a dozen pages, dragging out the sequences between the two combatants to emphasize their importance. By stringing out the text over a number of pages and dedicating, at times, a single page to as few as two lines, the format forces the reader to experience each word individually, lending gravitas and power to the final episode of Beowulf's life.

The translation is followed by three appendices, the first of which is an interview with Meyer about his composition of the work. This interview is especially useful for those who are interested in studying this edition of *Beowulf* as an artistic adaptation in and of itself; Meyer gives interesting insights with regard to the influence of his residency in the Yorkshire Dales, his approach to translating Old English into modern English, and the importance of the shifting audience of readers for the translation. Of special interest is his approach to the translation itself; he admits a tendency to avoid Latinate words in favor of simple, more native phrases, the intention being to mimic the original flavor of the Old English words as much as possible. Additionally, he admits that he sees this piece more as a 'commentary' than a traditional translation; it is because of this view that Meyer allows himself more freedom in his artistic vision. Perhaps the most significant change as a result of this approach is the poem's shift from an oral to a textual mode, from targeting an audience of listeners to one of readers. The heightened importance of the visual not only makes Meyer's adaptation significantly different from the original poem itself, but also from all other extant translations. The second appendix is a selective critical bibliography that includes a list of other editions and translations of *Beowulf*; criticism on Anglo-Saxon culture, Old English, and *Beowulf*; twentieth-century poetry that influenced the translation; and twentieth-century poetic criticism. This bibliography is perhaps most useful to students and scholars looking

⁴ *Beowulf: A New Translation*, Thomas Meyer, 92.

to study Meyer's work in a wider context of either *Beowulf's* translation history and/or modernist poetic adaptation, rather than as a useful starting point for *Beowulf* studies in a more general sense. The final appendix comprises Meyer's glossary and notes, in which he lists a number of the main characters and major places that appear in the poem, with short and long descriptions to aid readers in their comprehension of the tale. Whilst this appendix is relatively useful as a companion to consult alongside reading Meyer's poem, I would suggest that those unfamiliar with the poem or those encountering the text for the first time may benefit from reading an introduction to *Beowulf* from elsewhere rather than relying upon the final appendix itself in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how Meyer's adaptation reflects the original text.

Meyer's is an innovative and interesting take on this centuries-old text, and it is easily and strongly recommended for scholars interested in translation, *Beowulf* studies, and Old English language and literature. Modernist scholars interested in adaptation and translation in the twentieth century will also find much to admire and many fascinating avenues of research within the text. As a translation for teaching *Beowulf*, however, I would be more cautious and conscientious of the composition of one's class before choosing this translation as a primary course text. The text would be well-suited for teaching students who are already very familiar with poetry, specifically modernist poetry; students who are unfamiliar with poetry and poetics, however, may find this adaptation difficult to approach. On the other hand, the aesthetic composition of Meyer's translation provides a relief from the dense wordiness of other recent translations of *Beowulf*; his textual trickery and playful typographical innovations may well provide the hook to draw students into one of the earliest and greatest stories in the history of literature. Above all, Meyer's translation is an accomplished and fascinating work of literature in its own right, and valuable reworking of a major text.

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