



Université Bourgogne-Franche-Comté
Rare Book and Digital Humanities
M2 (2023–2024) 12 Jan 2024

The **M**any Faces of **B**eowulf

Amanda Hemmons

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Assignment: The fortunes and misfortunes of a text: identify and summarize the textual and editorial issues relating to an author or a topic of your choice (textual bibliography, editions, translations, censorship etc.).

Introduction

While it has been transcribed, translated, and printed hundreds of times over the centuries, there is only one original copy of the *Beowulf* manuscript in the entire world. It seems like such a fragile thing to be considered a foundation of English literature, but there we are.

Beowulf is an epic poem that is understood to take place in 6th century Scandinavia, though written somewhere around 975-1025CE. It has a combination of English and Scandinavian influences; there are Danish Kings and Pagan lore as well as Christian themes, and it was written in Old English, also called Anglo-Saxon.

The poem tells the story of Beowulf, a warrior who visits the Hall of Hrothgar, a king among the Danes. While there he kills the monster, Grendel, that has been plaguing the Hall for over a decade, then hunting down and killing Grendel's vengeful mother¹ before his final death at the hands of a dragon years later. Like many manuscripts dating before Gutenberg's printing press, it bears no title and has come to be known by the poem's main character. The poem itself is made of 3,183 lines and about 40,000 words— similar in length to C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

It is a famous piece of historical literature, and there have been countless people fascinated by the manuscript and that has resulted in countless notations and translations.

History of the manuscript

Today the singular copy of *Beowulf* is housed in the British Library, but it has a history one thousand years old— even if most of that history is unknown. What we do know is this: at some point in the late 10th or early 11th century, a collection of texts were compiled into a manuscript. It begins in one scribe's handwriting, scribe A, with a telling of the *Life of Saint Christopher*, then *Wonders of the East* (a fantastical sort of travelogue), then a translation of a letter of Alexander to Aristotle, before a partial recording of *Beowulf*, taken over mid-sentence by a second scribe, scribe B, who completes *Beowulf* before continuing with a poetic retelling of the Biblical *Book of Judith*².

Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing if there were ever more pieces to this manuscript. The very earliest piece of provenance we have for it is the name of the antiquarian Laurence Nowell inscribed on the first page, leading scholars to assume he had ownership of the manuscript during his life in the 16th century, between 1530 and 1570. For this reason the collection is referred to as the Nowell Codex. We know someone else put their hands on the Nowell Codex in this century; they combined it with another manuscript— referred to as the

¹ Chambers, *Beowulf*, 2.

² Sisam, "The "*Beowulf*" Manuscript," 336.

Southwick Codex for the Southwick Priory that owned it before. It contains a copy of Alfred the Great's translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, a translation of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, *Solomon and Saturn*, and a fragment of a life of Saint Quentin. These two combined codexes came into the ownership of Sir Robert Cotton at some point before his death in 1631; he may have been the man responsible for that combining. Due to his method of library organization, the double manuscript acquired the name Cotton MS Vitellius A XV³.

In 1702, the library collection was passed to the British Crown after the death of Sir Robert's heir and taken to Ashburnham House, where a terrible fire in 1731 destroyed nearly a quarter of the Cotton library and damaged MS Vitellius A XV and rendered many words illegible. Nonetheless, the manuscript served as part of the foundational collection of the British Museum in 1753⁴ where it still resides.

Very little notice was paid to the manuscript until 1786, when Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin, an Icelandic scholar and archivist, went to England to research medieval Danish-English contacts⁵ and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts with Viking influence. *Beowulf* was recognized then to be a stunning blend of fictional, mythic and historical elements and he received a commission from the Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic government to prepare a version for publication.

And the rest, one might say, is history. Brought at last to the attention of scholars, there are many who sought to interpret the poem and its fire-damaged pages. Some assistance came from a transcription of Judith that was made before the fire, which gave scholars a clearer view of scribe B's abbreviations and handwriting; the better to interpret the latter part of *Beowulf*. Cotton MS Vitellius A XV was rebound by the British Museum in 1845 with paper frames added in an attempt to slow the deterioration of the fire-damaged vellum pages.



Difficulties in Translation

To publish a book requires a desire to share that text with the world. Since there are very few people alive today with a fluency in Anglo-Saxon Old English, the ability to share *Beowulf* with readers means the epic poem is usually translated into a more easily understood language. From the earliest attempt by Thorkelin, who published his side-by-side comparison of his transcript of *Beowulf* and his Latin translation in 1815, to Maria Dahvana Headley's modern masterpiece of bro language in 2020, there have been many attempts to tell the story in a way that new readers would understand and appreciate.

However, it is no simple task to bring the Anglo-Saxon world to life. How does a translator even begin to convey the complicated layering of language used for *Beowulf*? Even when it was written a thousand years ago, it was a blend of contemporary words and archaic

³ Taylor and Salus. "THE COMPILATION OF COTTON VITELLIUS A XV," 199–204.

⁴ British Library, "Cotton MS Vitellius A XV."

⁵ Gerritsen, "What Use Are the Thorkelin Transcripts of 'Beowulf?'," 25.

imagery. Some think the poem itself is old, potentially as old as the 6th century setting the story takes place in, transmitted orally until it was at last written down. This is a possible explanation for the blend of archaic and contemporary language. Other scholars think *Beowulf's* language is a deliberate blend, meant to evoke that earlier time while remaining familiar to readers and listeners.

Insofar as any translation attempt is made, it requires an accurate copy of the original to translate from. The *Beowulf* manuscript makes this a difficult task, between its age and the fire damage that it suffered. There have been several transcripts and facsimiles created for *Beowulf*. The first two transcripts that were made we refer to as transcripts A and B. Transcript A was produced by a copyist under Thorkelin's instruction. We can guess that this person had no knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, due to the painstaking way they reproduced ligatures, abbreviations, and word divisions exactly as seen⁶. The parts of the poem too damaged by fire to read were left blank, there are dropped letters and some confusion of letters with similar shapes. Thorkelin's own transcript B reproduced what he understood to have read rather than reproducing what he saw. He expanded abbreviations, not always correctly, and made some guesswork of the damaged areas, but he did avoid most of the mechanical mistakes of transcript A. His version is generally considered an easier read than A, but ultimately scholars find A to be the more valuable of the two as it is a more objective visualization. Regarding B, "one cannot dismiss the possibility that Thorkelin sometimes anticipated his later editorial work by introducing emendations or normalizations into his copy" (Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith*, xxii).

In the 19th century they made more attempts at an accurate transcription. In 1880-1882, Julius Zupitza used bright lights in front of and behind pages to view words where the pages were darkened by soot. He published a black-and-white facsimile as well as a transcription of *Beowulf* in 1882. Zupitza's biggest flaw was that he didn't include many of the individual letters or partial words visible on the edges of the damaged pages. Almost a hundred years later, Kemp Malone was able to take advantage of more modern created his own facsimile transcription in 1969, followed by Kevin Kiernan in 1984 using fiber-optic and ultra-violet lighting⁷.

Ultimately, all of the attempts above are still subject to interpretation by the transcriber, translator, and viewer to explain the gaps left by damage and the multiple interpretations possible for the abbreviations. And this is in addition to the already difficult task of interpreting the words that are fully present!

Every translator and writer that has worked on *Beowulf* has their own reasoning for how they choose to interpret the poem. And, there comes a time where every *Beowulf* writer has to decide how faithful they want to be to the language used in the poem. Does one choose to aim for an accurate representation of Anglo-Saxon wording, or attempt a more approachable method of story-telling? *Beowulf* predominantly uses the West Saxon dialect of Old English and the poem itself uses language that we generally believe to be contemporary to the time it was written, but with enough archaic flair to evoke an earlier era. For example, using beorn for

⁶ Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith*, xxi.

⁷ Kiernan, "The State of the 'Beowulf' Manuscript 1882-1983," 24.

“warrior,” is a variant of the word for bear that by the time of the manuscript was already limited to heroic poetry⁸.

In addition to language choices, the task is made even more difficult by the fact that Anglo-Saxon poetry like *Beowulf* was in a style unlike anything we see today. Each line would be broken up into two half lines, separated by a caesura— a metrical pause or break in a verse that is a long alliterative line⁹. There is no fixed number of beats per line, but rather the poet uses alliterative words to link the first half of the line to the second half by similar sounding word beginnings. Sometimes these alliterations are maintained in translation, such as the one used in Kiernan’s *Electronic Beowulf* archive:

Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum
There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes

There’s no rhyming or sense of rhythm that a modern poet would recognize. For this reason, most translations of *Beowulf* are in prose form, especially ones that attempt a literal, word-for-word translation. These are often much longer than the poem’s 40,000 words, due to the need for taking full sentences or phrases to communicate the same meaning that Old English could convey in a single word.

Tolkien, a scholar and a linguist (as well as a famous writer of fantasy novels), believed it was necessary to replicate that effect by writing in modern English with his own archaic flair. For him that would mean using certain medieval words and phrasing, like, “What warriors are ye, clad in corslets, that have come thus steering your tall ship over the streets of the sea.”¹⁰ Here, Tolkien’s usage of “corslet” for armor and “ye” for you are meant to call up the sense of a much earlier era. From this example you can also see that Tolkien did not choose to replicate Anglo-Saxon alliteration.

In addition to metrical pauses, alliteration, and archaic wording, another option some writers take in their *Beowulf* adaptation is to create a rhyme scheme. While this is understandably controversial, because it is inventing something wholecloth that did not exist in the original poem, the reason for it is to evoke a sense of poetry in the mind of a modern audience the same way that alliteration and caesura would have for an Anglo-Saxon audience.

The last aspect to take into consideration when adapting *Beowulf* is related to the Anglo-Saxon method of descriptive language we call kenning. Thomas Gardner describes a “kenning may loosely be defined as the poetic interpretation or description of a thing or thought by means of a condensed simile.”¹¹ It usually takes the form of a compound word, and *Beowulf* is full of them. Seamus Heaney’s notable translation contains a variety of kennings for the word dragon: Hoard-guardian, Sky-plague, Poison-breather, Barrow-dweller, Treasure-minder.

⁸ Tolkien, *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*, 54-55.

⁹ Fakundiny, “The Art of Old English Verse Composition,” 133.

¹⁰ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, 42.

¹¹ Gardner, “The Old English Kenning,” 109.

Examples of the different forms that Beowulf takes depending on the writer, see below:

Beowulf original text transcription¹²

- [1] Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
- [2] þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
- [3] hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Tolkien's medievalist translation¹³

Lo! the glory of the kings of the
people of the Spear-Danes in
days of old we have heard tell,
how those princes did deeds
of valour.

J. R. Clark's metrical translation¹⁴

Lo ! We have heard tell how mighty the kings of
the Spear-bearing Danes were in days that are past, –
how these men of high birth did valorous deeds.

Headley's modern translation¹⁵

Bro! Tell me we still
know how to speak of
kings! In the old
days,
everyone knew what men
were: brave, bold,

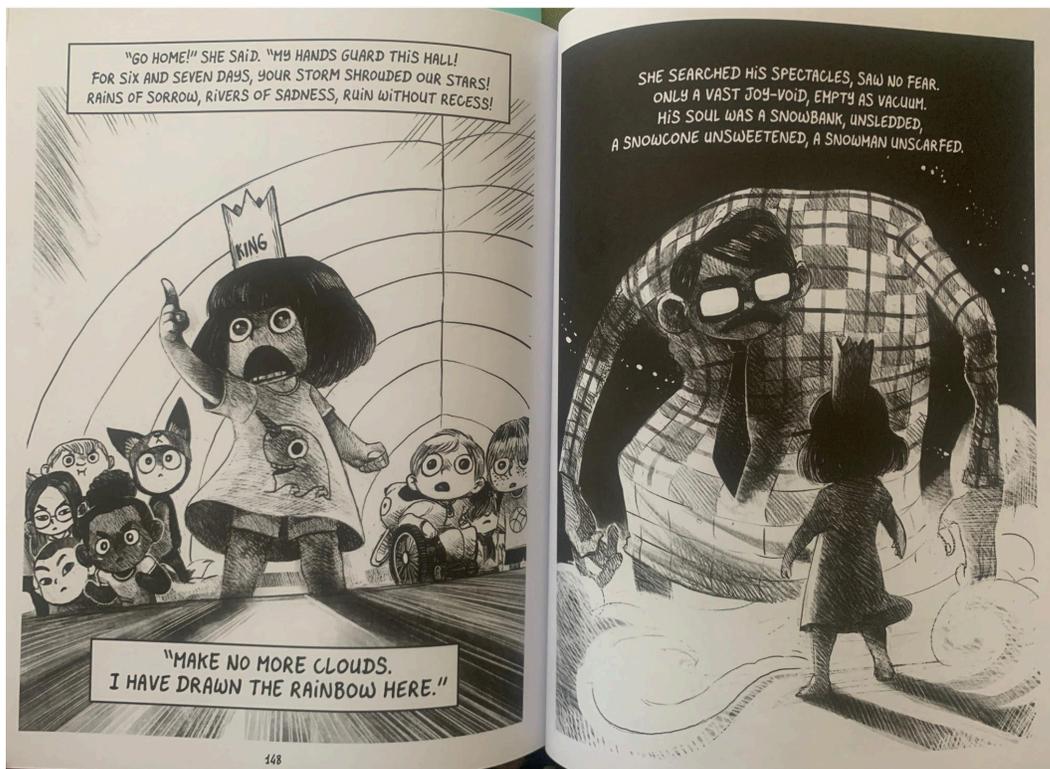


image from *Bea Wolf* written by Zach Weinersmith, art by Boulet

¹² Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf*, <https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/ebeo4.0/CD/main.html>.

¹³ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, 1.

¹⁴ Hall, *Beowulf: a metrical translation into modern English*, 1

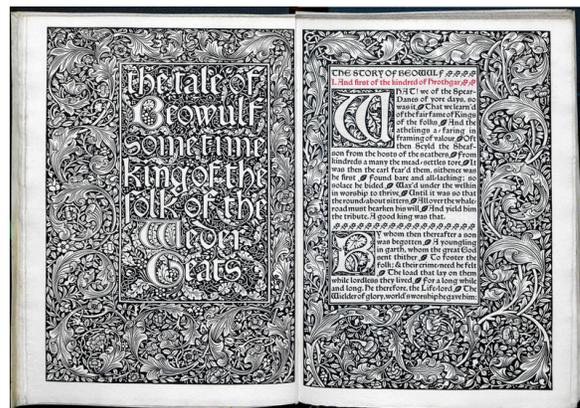
¹⁵ Headley, *Beowulf: A New Translation*, 1

Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin was responsible for the first complete translation of *Beowulf* in 1815. It features Thorkelin's own transcription of the epic poem side by side with his Latin translation. Published in Copenhagen by Th.E. Rangel, in quarto with uncut pages and Morocco-gilt binding.

Kemble, John, 1837. *A Translation of the Anglo-Saxon Poem of "Beowulf"* (London). Volume one, published in 1833, bore a revision of the current Old English transcription, but volume two has the first appearing modern English translation into literal prose. Published by William Pickering in London in hardcover.

Wackerbarth, A. Diedrich. 1849. *Beowulf: An Epic Poem*. Translated from the Anglo-Saxon into English Verse; specifically into a ballad meter using rhyme, with mixed reactions from critics. Published by William Pickering in London in hardcover with cloth boards and a frontispiece folding map.

Morris, William, and Alfred J. Wyatt. 1895. *The Tale of Beowulf, Sometime King of the Weder Geats*. As the ninth English translation, this version has a distinctive medievalizing style and imitative meter. Printed in black and red in Troy and Chaucer types with decorative woodcut title, borders, and initials. Kelmscott Press only printed 300 copies on paper and 8 on vellum in, so the first editions are exceedingly rare.



Source: William Morris Archive

Hall, J. R. Clark. 1914. *Beowulf: a Metrical Translation into Modern English*. This edition attempted to mimic the poem's metrical pauses between the first and second half of the lines. Printed in Cambridge by the University press on green cloth boards.

Morgan, Edwin. 1952. *Beowulf: A Verse Translation into Modern English*. Translated by a well-known poet who would later become Poet Laureate of Scotland. Published in Kent by Hand and Flower Press in hardcover with a red and yellow dust jacket.

Raffel, Burton. 1963. *Beowulf*. Freely translated into roughly imitative meter. An accessible copy reprinted many times in paperback form; a later edition in 1972 was printed in New York by Mentor in hard cover with drawings by Leonard Baskin.

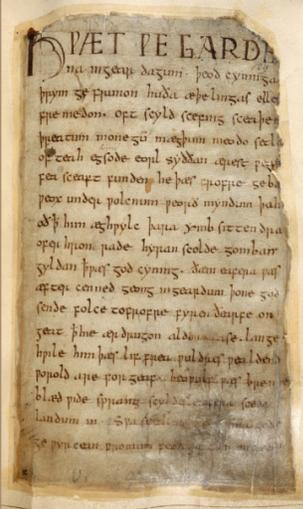
Heaney, Seamus. 1999. *Beowulf*. This is a translation by a Nobel Prize Laureate poet. It incorporates the poet's Northern Irish diction and turns of phrase and, much like the original epic poem, was designed to be spoken aloud. It was included in the first volume of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* for the year 2000 by W. W. Norton & Co. Also published separately by Faber & Faber in London, and Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in New York to release and market the translation first as a freestanding book.

Tolkien, J.R.R. 2014. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. Translated in 1920–1926 by the well-known author and linguist. Later edited by his son, Christopher Tolkien, and published posthumously. Published in both New York and Boston by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in hardcover with a blue-green dust jacket, and a limited run in blue cloth boards with a matching blue slip case.

Headley, Maria Dahvana. 2020. *Beowulf: A New Translation*. Controversial and notorious for its opening line of “Bro!,” this edition garnered much attention from both casual readers and scholars alike. Has a deliberate feminist focus, giving attention to female characters from the original epic poem that are usually overlooked. Published in softcover by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in New York.

Abbott, Jean; Treharne, Elaine, and Fafinski, Mateusz (Eds.). *'Beowulf' By All: Community Translation and Workbook*. 2021. This edition was made by a collaboration of over 200 contributors. Published by Leeds Arc Humanities Press in English. An earlier version appeared in 2018, as *Beowulf by All, Version 1.0* from Stanford Text (of Stanford University Press). <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50261>.

ublishing History



CA. 700 - 1000 CE

A BEOWULFTIMELINE

Source of data up to 2000: [Annotated List of Beowulf Translations](#) by Marijane Osborn. 2000 - 2024 data compiled by Amanda Robin Hemmons (with additional research to source titles for Osborn's list of partials).

DE DANORUM
REBUS GESTIS
SECVLI ILLETVI
POENA DANICVM
DIALECTO
ANGLOSAXONICA
EX BIBLIOTHECA
COTTOMANA
MUSAEI
BRITANNICI

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Xotes

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