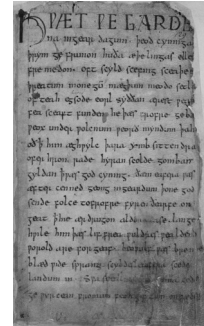


ALAN SULLIVAN et al. (2004). *Beowulf*. New York: Pearson, 234 pp.; J. R. R. TOLKIEN (2014). *Beowulf – A translation and commentary together with Sellic Spell*. London: Harper Collins Pub., 448 pp.; DAVID WRIGHT (1980). *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*. London: Penguin, 128 pp.



This book review proposes to present a comparison analysis of J. R. R. Tolkien's adaptation of *Beowulf* with two other published adaptations in by Allan Sullivan et al and David Wright.

*Beowulf* is a 11<sup>th</sup> century Old English (West Saxon dialect) poem by an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet, and it consists of 3,182 alliterative lines. The poem was produced between 975 and 1025 and it has no title in the original manuscript but has become known by the name of the story's central character. This epic poem is a classic tale of the triumph of good versus evil, and it is divided effortlessly into three acts; it is the longest poem of the genre in Old English, the language spoken in Anglo-Saxon England before the Norman Conquest. The true leitmotif of *Beowulf*, namely death and defeat, was being ignored in favour of archaeological and philological disputes on how much of the poem was fictional or historic.

The story relates the adventures of its eponymous hero (Beowulf – war wolf or bee-hunter in Modern English), and his succeeding battles with a monster named Grendel, with Grendel's revengeful mother and with a dragon which was guarding a hoard of treasure (just like Smaug was guarding the treasure of Kingdom under the Mountain in *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien). The poem opens in Denmark, where Grendel is terrorising the kingdom. The Geatish prince Beowulf hears the plight of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, and sails to his aid with a group of warriors. Beowulf encounters Grendel in unarmed combat and deals the monster its deathblow by ripping off its arm. Victorious, the hero goes home to Geatland (Götaland in modern Sweden)

and later becomes king of the Geats. Fifty years later, Beowulf defeats a dragon, but is mortally wounded in the battle. In *The Hobbit*, Bard, the Bowman (later King of Dale), kills the greedy Smaug with black arrow that pierced his strong scales and heart. After Beowulf's death, his attendants immolate his body and erect a tower on a peninsula in his memory. *Beowulf* closes with the king's funeral, and a lament for the dead hero.

*Beowulf* is adapted by numerous scholars, such as Tolkien, David Wright, Seamus Heaney, Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy, among others. I will be analysing and comparing three of these adaptations in terms of the writing structure (literary genre), types of sentence and the words used.

In the case of *Beowulf* that was written in Old English, one cannot speak of translation, because it is the same language as English that evolved through time. Anglo-Saxon is an ancient West dialect of English before the invasion of England by William the Conqueror. Thus, we speak of a process of modernization called adaptation, so it is not correct to use the concept of translation in this context, because of its degree of difficulty of translation depends on the translator's knowledge of the languages in question. The British scholar Peter Newmark defines adaptation, taken from Vinay and Darbelnet, as, "The use of a recognized equivalent between two situations. It is a process of cultural equivalence [...]" (Newmark, 1988, p. 91).

An adaptation, also known as a free translation, is a technique whereby the translator substitutes a term with cultural connotations, where those connotations are restricted to readers of the original language text, with a term with corresponding cultural connotations that would be familiar to readers of the translated manuscript or text. Adaptation is not to be confused with localization, however, which is used when the target audience speaks a different variant of the same language. When adapting a message, we are not translating it literally. This does not mean, however, that when adapting a message or idea we are being unfaithful to the original message, or that one is not doing his/her job well (translating). Simply, there are situations in which it is required.

One can find many adaptations of *Beowulf* including prose versions of the epic poem. In his essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, Tolkien shows his contempt towards the critics that fail to deal with the beauty of the poetry in favour of history and philology. The scholar does not question *Beowulf*'s capacity to clarify the reader about something in those other disciplines, but to ignore the poetic aspects as one spends time in *Beowulf* limits one's view of the beauty that comes from considering it. Tolkien further refers that "*Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry

so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts that research has discovered” (Heaney, 2002, 105). One should “be able to look out upon the sea” (106).

According to Archibald Strong, the interest on *Beowulf* is not purely literary, but it is an important historical document. This writer tried to shield this work of art of any criticism that could be done. In my opinion one should not approach it through this perspective, because if the reader is not concerned about poetry at all, but seeking information wherever it can be found, if the so-called poem contains in fact no poetry at all.

Poetry just makes the task of reading an old story much harder. According to Tolkien’s opinion:

The very nature of Old English metre is often misjudged. In it there is no single rhythmic pattern progressing from the beginning of the line to the end and repeated with variation in other lines. The lines of the text do not go according to a tune. They are founded on a balance; an opposition between two halves of roughly equivalent [but not necessarily equal] phonetic weight, and significant content, which are more often rhythmically contrasted than similar. They are more like masonry than music (126).

The writer further explains that:

In this fundamental fact of poetic expression... there is a parallel to the total structure of *Beowulf*. The text “is indeed the most successful Old English poem because in it the elements, language, metre, theme, structure, are all most nearly in harmony (126).

Tolkien also implies that the verse rhyme has often gone *off track* (my italics) through listening for an accentual rhythm and pattern and it seems to slow down the pace of the line while it is being read. The theme has been criticised because it goes astray through considering it as the narrative handling of a plot and “it seems to halt and stumble. Language and verse, of course, differ from stone or wood or paint, and can be only heard or read in a time-sequence; so that in any poem that deals at all with characters and events some narrative element must be present (126).

The poem does not rhyme at the end of each verse, and it does not have a regular rhythm. Instead, each verse has a caesura, or a division in the middle, and the two halves of the line are linked by alliteration. “Hwæt wē Gār-Dena

| in geār-dagum.” The pattern of the consonants creates the stresses, and thereby the rhythm. So, it seems like it is a composition not a tune, more prose like.

Tolkien translated *Beowulf* into prose in 1926 (it was not published until 2014) because of his extensive work on it, but this does not imply that the textual analysis influenced the process of adaptation. According to his son Christopher Tolkien, his father was a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University and most of his lectures were on *Beowulf*, where most of the poem was closely analysed with the concern with its verbal detail. The scholar gives an account of Old English metre using modern English, bringing out “the ancestral kinship of the two languages, as well as the differences between them” (C. Tolkien: 1997, P. 61). Tolkien clarifies that each line of Old English poetry had two opposed corresponding halves, groups of words which had six possible patterns of stress, such as ‘falling-falling’, like:

*knights in | armour.*  
4.....1 4....1

where 4 means a full lift (maximum stress) and 1 is the lowest dip in stress. A clashing pattern would be like:

*on high | mountains.*  
1....4 4.....1

Tolkien highlights that these are still the patterns found universally in Modern English; poetry diverges from prose, the scholar argues that the poet clears away everything else, so “these patterns stand opposed to each other” (C. Tolkien, 1997, p. 62).

The writer then provides “a free version of *Beowulf* in this metre (on pages 210-228). This contrasts with the prose style of *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, which Tolkien found disappointing. The verse rhyme was still in his view ‘free’, an imprecise adaptation, though it captures rhythm, structure (though he felt that even that was slightly deluded), and much of the meaning. The prose only had the goal of encompassing the entire poem. The passage should be read gradually, but naturally: that is with the stresses and tones required solely by the sense.” The first few lines, which as Tolkien says are non-literal adaptations of Old English, run:

## Old English

Fyrst forð gewát· flota wæs on ýðum  
 bát under beorge· beornas gearwe  
 on stefn stigon

## Tolkien's version

Tíme passed a|wáy. On the tíde | flóated  
 under bánk | their bóat. In her bóws | móunted  
 bráve mèn | blithely.

Tolkien also describes variations on the basic patterns. For example, dips (between lifts) were usually monosyllabic, but the number of syllables was not limited by Old English metre, so a series of weak syllables was permitted in a half-line. Other variations included breaking a lift into two syllables, the first short but stressed, the second weak, with for instance ‘vessel’ in place of ‘boat’.

The writer states that calling Old English verse alliterative is an inaccurate term for two reasons; firstly, it is not essential to the metre, which would work without it; secondly, it does not depend on letters, as in modern English alliteration, but on sounds. Old English alliteration, then, is an “agreement of the stressed elements in beginning with the same consonant, or in beginning with no consonant.”

Moreover, all words starting with any stressed vowel are considered to alliterate; the writer gives the example of ‘old’ alliterating with ‘eager’. Tolkien states three rules of Old English alliteration. “One full lift in each half-line must alliterate” (C. Tolkien, 1997, p. 66).

In the second half-line, only the first lift may alliterate: the second must not. In the first half-line, both lifts can alliterate; the stronger one must do so. The scholar notes that these rules force the second half-line to have its stronger lift first, so lines tend to fall away at the end, contrasting with a “rise in intensity” at the start of the next line.

Tolkien states that “The main *metrical* function of alliteration is to *link* the two separate and balanced patterns together into a complete line”, so it must be as early in the second half-line as possible. It also quickens and relieves heavy patterns (which had double alliteration). Rhyme is used only “gratuitously, and for special effects.” Tolkien gives an example from *Beowulf* on lines 212-213: ‘stréamas wundon || sund wið sande’ (*waves wound || sea against sand*), where ‘wundon’ rhymes (internally) with ‘sund’. The writer explains: “[here] the special effect (breakers are beating on the shore) may be regarded as deliberate”. His version of this captures the rhyme and the alliteration, as well as the meaning:

Old English	Tolkien's version
stréamas wundon	Bréakers   túrning
sund wið sande	<i>spúrned the   shíngle.</i>

Tolkien ends his essay with an analysis of lines 210-228 of *Beowulf*, providing the original text, marked up with stresses and his metrical patterns for each half-line, as well as a literal adaptation with poetical words underlined. He notes that there are three words for boat and for wave, five for men, four for sea: in each case some are poetical, some normal.

He also notes that sentences generally stop in the middle of a line, so “sense-break and metrical break are usually opposed.” He points out that significant elements in second half-lines are often “caught up and re-echoed or elaborated”, giving a characteristic ‘parallelism’ to *Beowulf*. This is seen not just in such small details, but in the parallel arrangement of narrative, descriptive and speech passages; in the use of separate passages describing incidents of strife between Swedes and Geats; and at the largest scale, in the fact that the whole poem itself is like a line of its own verse written large, a balance of two great blocks, A + B; or like two of its parallel sentences with a single subject but no expressed conjunction. Youth + Age; he rose – fell. It may not be, at large or in detail, fluid or musical, but it is strong to stand: tough builder’s work of true stone.

If we compare Tolkien’s adaptation with the one done by Alan Sullivan et al, one can somehow perceive that the structure of used by Sullivan does not work at all, because it fails to present an accurate adaptation of the two corresponding halves of each line by using incorrect adjective structures such as «more mighty» instead of mightier, among other examples. On the other hand, Tolkien’s prose version presents a wordily and vibrant vocabulary exhibition and with an epic and poetic tone, while Sullivan tries to follow up the original version with lines that do not rhyme at all:

Tolkien’s version:

«Of this, of Grendel’s deeds, the knight of Hygelac, esteemed among the Geats,  
heard in his home from afar» (lines 168-169).

Sullivan’s version:

«A thane of Hygelac | heard in his homeland  
of Grendel’s deeds | Great among Geats,  
this man was more mighty | than any then living» (lines 168-170).

There is also omission of content in Sullivan's version, while Tolkien extensively shows an expressive beyond measure description of the deeds of Geats that are going to embark bravely to sea:

Tolkien's version

«Champions of the people of the Geats that good man had chosen from the boldest that he could find. And fifteen in all they sought now their timbered ship, while that warrior. Skilled in the ways of the sea, led them to the margins of the land. Time passed on. Afloat upon the waves was the boat beneath the cliffs. Eagerly the warriors mounted the prow, and the streaming seas swirled upon the sand» (lines 176-181).

Sullivan's version

«He gathered the bravest | of Geatish guardsmen.  
One of fifteen, | the skilled sailor  
Strode to his ship | at the ocean's edge.  
He was keen to embark: | his keel was beached  
under the cliff | where sea-currents curled  
surf against sand; | his soldiers were ready» (lines 176-181).

Wright also adapted *Beowulf* in prose like Tolkien. The scholar praises the creator of Middle-Earth and it says that «[yet] it is impossible not to be sensible of the cogent arguments that Professor Tolkien, in his notable preface to the latest revision of Clark-Hall's adaptation, puts forward against attempts to render the artificial, archaic, and poetic diction of "Beowulf" into straightforward and contemporary English Prose» (Wright: 1980, p. 23). Wright also says that "Old English prose is lucid and straightforward; but the Old English verse is quite another kettle of fish." It uses archaic and poetic terms which are not employed in prose, as well as compounds (known as 'kennings', for example the world soldier can be expressed in dozens of ways – shield-bearer, battle hero, spear fighter and many more) that have to be deciphered like riddles of the clues of a crossword puzzle. «[...] This vocabulary and habit of diction constitute the special beauty, richness, and intricacy of Anglo-Saxon poetry, [...] [and] it constitutes the principal difficulty of translating any Anglo-Saxon poem satisfactorily.» (22).

This scholar uses an informal discourse in relation to the poetic and magical capacity that Tolkien employs in his one translated version of *Beowulf*:

HEAR! We know of the bygone glory of the Danish Kings, and the heroic exploits of those princes. Scyld Scefing, in the face of hostile armies, used often to bring nations into subjection, and strike terror in the hearts of their leaders. In the beginning he had been picked up a castaway; but he afterwards found consolation for this misfortune. For his power and fame increased until each of his overseas neighbours was forced to submit and pay him a tribute. He was an excellent king (27).

Tolkien's version is slightly more formal and richly described:

Lo! The glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes in the days of old we have heard tell, how those princes did deeds of valour. Oft Scyld Scefing robbed the hosts of foemen, many peoples, of the seats where they drank their mead, laid fear upon men, he who first was found forlorn; comfort for that he lived to know, mighty grew under heaven, throve in honour, until all that dwelt night about, over the sea where the whale rides, must hearken to him and yield him tribute – a good king was he! (Tolkien: 2014, p.13).

There is a difference in terms of the quality of the content between these two prose versions. Wright lacks punctuation and he explains this assumption with the limited use and not consistent of the Old English original text; this is not acceptable, because there is no excuse to not use it properly; the text becomes poorly organized, and the process of reading will be quite awkward. The scholar also states that his “punctuation is modern, though based on that supplied by Wrenn and Klaeber in their editions” (25). In my humble opinion, the text is presented in a very colloquial way, where there is no sense of well-structured sentences and the ideas are sprung all over the text without a break (a comma or a semi-colon), so the reader cannot breathe properly between the different parts described. The process of reading is a means to learning.

The nouns presented also lack on expression because the adjectives are almost inexistent. Tolkien's version is written in a very noble and stimulating way, employing lots of expressive adjectives and the vocabulary is not that common, it seems like we are reading a poem. This writer was ahead of time.

In conclusion, I have read *Beowulf* when I was only 28 years old. I did not understand its beauty and worth until I reread *The Hobbit* again in 2010. *Beowulf* was a great source of inspiration for Tolkien. His love for teaching ancient languages like Old Norse, West Anglo-Saxon dialect of Old English gave him the appropriate tools to create his own world of wonder – Middle-



-Earth. It began with a simple and yet intriguing sentence: «In hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not nasty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort» (Tolkien: 2006, p. 3).

I fell in love this lovely and beautiful description of a hobbit hole and all the different episodes that Bilbo Baggins must face to succeed on his mission to conquer his fears and doubts and to regain the Lonely Mountain for Thorin Oakenshield's host of dwarves. Gandalf is the key to their quest's success. Bilbo just wants to go back to the Shire, to his comfort.

*Beowulf* has also to face many dangers and a perilous journey to help the king of Danes to defeat a Dragon and a Villainess. The story begins and ends a funeral. The fate of the host of *Beowulf*'s warriors is linked with their steadiness and courage to face all their obstacles to go back home safe and sound.

Tolkien's adaptation of *Beowulf* is the best version by a mile of distance to the other versions published. His way of writing and describing, of what he sees in his fruitful mind, gives us the best presentation of what the scholar thought about the days of kings of old, the deeds of heroes and warriors that were not afraid to face their greatest fears.

Tolkien did a great deal to his country and its culture and history that are bounded to greatness, sacrifice and valour. No one could ever surpass his mighty imagination and gift with words. He created a name for the English language that is known as Westrom or common tongue and it is spoken by all the free-peoples of Middle-Earth. It is one of the mother tongues of the Hobbits, Gondorians, Rohirrim and Haradrim; The Elven languages named Quenya and Sindarin have close connections with the Old-English and Old Welsh and they are spoken by the Elves and remaining Númenoreans; finally, the Black Speech of Mordor is spoken by the Dark Lord Sauron and his Orcs of Baradûr.

*Beowulf* is undoubtedly a literary reference for the Anglo-Saxon mythology history of England as a country and its humble and brave fight against the Danish invaders, the Vikings.

Wright and Sullivan et al inaccurate adaptations will continue to be studied, because of their punctuation, alliterative rhyme mistakes and imprecise use of words, as means to an end to compare to the best ones out there by J. R. R. Tolkien and Seamus Heaney. We can perceive what is the best literary option to keep up with story of *Beowulf*, a wondrous warrior.

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