

“I Have Heard it Said”: Towards a New Translation of *Beowulf*

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Abstract

The fields of translation and creative writing have long been seen as entirely distinct, with many writers drawing a distinction between types based on both the level of syntactic experimentation and the background of the translator. While most theorists would disagree, popular opinion (and the opinion of some poet/translators) seems to be that the two types of writing are differentiated by the amount of academic rigour and creative inspiration that goes into each: translation and creative writing are regarded as not merely different kinds of writing, but as involving different ways of writing. This thesis is an introspective exploration into the nature of translation, via a new translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*. By translating *Beowulf*, reporting on that process, and comparing it with my creative work, this work provides an articulation of the creative process that views translation as a particular way of writing creatively that uses a source text as a narrative constraint.

This work consists of two components: creative and critical. The creative portion is a translation of *Beowulf* which breaks the source poem up into numerous smaller pieces presented in a variety of voices, registers, and viewpoints. The critical portion is an examination of how that translation came about, and delineates the entire process, from initial preconceptions to final finished work. It explores the issues of how to domesticate or foreignise a poem so removed from modern England both culturally and temporally, what level of knowledge a translator can or should expect of her readers, and where knowledge and authority can be situated in a translation. The methodology of the critical portion is an analysis of *Beowulf's* history as a source text and as a translation, a study of translation theories, and an experiential analysis of the process of producing a new translation of *Beowulf*.

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1: Introduction

On 26 January 2007, Alan Brownjohn included in his *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) review of Robin Robertson's translations of Tomas Tranströmer the following observation about types of translation:

"Translation", "version" and "imitation" have become the three loose categories into which efforts to transfer poetry from one language into another are placed, the last suggesting a free indulgence of the translator's own, preferably charismatic, style. (Brownjohn 2007)

Brownjohn also noted that while Robertson identified his work as an imitation of Tranströmer's source texts, and his publishers categorise his poetry as versions, Brownjohn regards Robertson's translations as close, with "only minor liberties. . . detectable" (Brownjohn 2007).

What began ostensibly as a book review spiralled into five months of vociferous debate in the TLS Letters section. Robin Fulton, in a letter that also accused Robertson of producing translations remarkably similar to Fulton's own, wrote that Robertson's poems were "neither dependable translations nor independent imitations," a system of categorisation that John Burnside, in a subsequent letter, described as "oddly narrow-minded" (TLS, 9 February 2007). Fulton's response included the complaint that "current literary fashion tends to demote and even denigrate the idea that a translator must give close attention and respect to the words of his (or her) author, an attention which presupposes a knowledge of the language in which the words were originally written". Fulton's argument conflates a freer style of translation with a lessened facility in the source language; the overarching complaint, however, seems to have turned the historical overemphasis on 'faithfulness' on its head: according to Fulton, it is not the poets producing experimental or free or versions of translations who are undervalued these days, but rather the reliable translators.

Brownjohn's classification of types of translation (not to mention the subsequent months of debate over those classifications) highlights a relationship between translation and original writing that has, although always problematic, become even more complex in recent decades. In the classical and medieval eras, the genre of translation did not exist as such: authors rewrote and

reworked texts and presented them as their own work; translation was seen as part of the arsenal of an author's techniques (Hoenselaars 2006). In the nineteenth century, translation came to be seen as a way of allowing an audience to encounter an author they would not otherwise be able to experience, and evaluations of a translation's success became centred around ideas of 'faithfulness' to the source author's vision (Bassnett 1988). In subsequent years, and particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, translation theorists have agreed that translation is a much more complex interaction between source and target authors, texts, and cultures, but also that the target author is fundamentally present in all aspects of the target text (Friar 1971).

There remains, though, a gap between how translation theorists conceive of the act of translation and how a wider audience, particularly an audience from the world of creative writing, views translation. A division seems to have arisen between translations viewed as maintaining a close relationship—either syntactically or along other parameters—with their source text (often for an academic audience reading in parallel with that source text), which clings to evaluative standards similar to those employed by a nineteenth-century reader, and more explicitly experimental translations, particularly those produced by authors also known for their creative writing. These translators are often at pains to distinguish their works from other translations, often referring to them as versions, digressions, or simply as works in their own right (See Lowell 1961, Logue 1981, Paterson 2006). To a translator like Fulton, this division seems to classify translators as either workaday drudges producing translations for students which are otherwise overlooked, or as celebrity poets distancing themselves from the source texts from which their translations spring. This distinction between the act of translation and the act of creative writing, while long since dismissed by translation theorists, seems to linger not just in the public's mind, but in the minds of many poets who seem to disavow their work as being within translation even as they perform it. Why is translation often so difficult to evaluate as a creative act? And is there a way to explore the relationship between original writing and translation that does not necessitate classifying work as merely one or the other?

This thesis is an exploration of the interaction of original writing and translation, and posits that rather than viewing these as the two ends of a continuum, it is more productive to widen the idea of translation to encapsulate many different kinds of translation, and to recognise that “a translation can be different things” (Boase-Beier 2012: 500). Maria Tymoczko first articulated her concept of translation as a “cluster concept” in 2007—itself a development of Wittgenstein

(1953)—as a way of describing cross-cultural translations with myriad interests and priorities (Tymoczko 2007: 83). This cluster concept approach allows translation studies as a whole to “affirm and investigate. . . distinct clusters”, without having to compare or rank the clusters against one another; it allows a greater whole of translation to exist without stifling the individual interests and priorities of particular translations (Tymoczko 2007: 105). This thesis posits that applying Tymoczko’s conception of translation as clusters beyond her more limited application and instead to translation as a whole allows the dialogue around translation to move beyond merely marking boundaries between original writing and translation, and instead move into examining how different focuses can affect both the process and production of translation. In this approach, the difference between more close and more experimental translations is rooted in their target audiences and in their respective relationships between the source and target texts. The more experimental cluster—often referred to here as a ‘free’ translation—can be seen as primarily interested in translation as a creative process which uses the source text as a constraint within the writing process, and approaches translation as a *way* of creative writing: a type of writing, just like the distinction between a prose author and a poet, or a free verse writer and a composer of sonnets, that is utilised by an author interested in exploring that particular type of composition. This type of free translation does not necessarily mean free in a strictly syntactic sense, but rather an approach to translation which is interested primarily in translation as one manner of writing creatively. By viewing poetry translation as “a branch of poetics”, as Jean Boase-Beier describes, translation can be examined as translation *and* as creative writing, within the same cluster (Boase-Beier 2012: 502).

The relationship between original writing and translation is explored here by a practical method: the production of an explicitly experimental translation of *Beowulf* (subtitled “A Translation” for reasons that will be explained in more detail later), including both background discussions of pertinent issues and a reflective examination of the process of producing that translation. Because that process is intensely personal, portions of this thesis—namely the description of original composition in this introduction and the discussion of the translating process in chapter three—will be written in the first person. This is intended to emphasise the subjectivity of the process; while the act of writing is already by definition an intensely subjective process—and indeed, that subjectivity forms part of the argument that translation is a form of creative writing—sharing the experience of translating in a more immediate form of discourse is intended to both highlight the subjectivity of the process and illustrate how the argument of this thesis is put into practice.

As the contemplative nature of this thesis reveals, it is not intended to stand as an overarching survey of translation theory. The argument of this thesis is, in part, that Tymoczko's contention that "a translation can be different things", and that a productive approach to translation is to move focus from defining what a translation is to identifying the readers it is signalling (Boase-Beier 2012: 500). More experimental translations, while still undeniably translations, should signal to their prospective readers the sort of text they are—namely a text more explicitly interested in the intersection of source and target authors—thereby also advertising the sort of audience for which they have been produced. Similarly, this project is fundamentally interested in the intersection of translation and original writing, and is intended to serve as a case study of sorts for other writers and theorists interested in this particular interaction. Authors such as Susan Bassnett and Josephine Balmer have written about how their own writing has been influenced by their work in translation (Balmer 2004, Bassnett & Bush 2006). This project approaches that intersection but from the opposite angle: rather than examining translation and writing from the point of view of what this author's original writing has in common with her translation, it instead examines how the process of translation reveals not just the principles underlying a personal translation practice, but her writing practice as a whole.

One of the most immediate questions this translation presents is thus whether it is, in fact, a translation. It departs from the structure of the source text quite radically: dividing what was an unbroken narrative into discrete poems, as well as changing a regular meter into many different poetic forms. This approach is mirrored in the actual plot of the poem; the translation often adds descriptive elements not present in the source text. While it is subtitled "a translation," the question is purposefully raised whether this should be considered a translation at all. (As should now be clear, this author does regard it as translation, with the more comprehensive viewpoint described above.)

Past poet/translators have often demarcated their free translations by referring to them as something else; Robert Lowell titled his 1961 collection *Imitations*, and wrote in his introduction that his poems should not be considered translations; rather, he was trying to write what the original poets "might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America" (Lowell 1961: xi). Christopher Logue called his translation "an account" of *The Iliad*, much like Anne Carson's titling of her translation *An Oresteia*; the use of an indefinite article signifies that the

translation offered is merely one of many rather than a definitive account. Don Paterson has referred to his translations as 'versions' of Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus*. It seems that more experimental translators, particularly when they are established as poets in their own right, tend to highlight how their translations should perhaps not be considered strictly as such.

That disavowal, however, is not always respected by the translating community. Lowell's collection of translations won the 1962 Bollingen Poetry Translation Prize. Similarly, Tony Harrison's 1981 translation of Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, which he described as a "rediscovery of the dignity" of his Yorkshire accent, won the 1983 European Poetry Translation Prize (Fay & Oakes 1991: 289). An excerpt from this translation of *Beowulf*, "The Collar", won the 2011 Times Stephen Spender Prize for literary translation. These facts are not intended to imply that enough gold medals on a text allows it to be defined however the poet wishes, but rather are mentioned because they are recognitions given out by the translating community: they are an indication that these free translations, even when they identify themselves as such, are still considered by those working within translation as translations. Patrick McGuinness has referred to translations falling along a "spectrum of fidelity and freedom", and these translations should be seen simply as translations further along that spectrum than most (*Times* Stephen Spender Prize 2011).

It is interesting to note that *Beowulf* in particular has been not just a source text often translated in more experimental ways, but one that remains a locus for discussion of how to evaluate freer translations. In the irresistibly titled "To Thwack or Be Thwacked," John Kenny Crane evaluates several different translations of *Beowulf* (Crane 1970). While this article is by now over forty years old, its usefulness is based not in the exhaustiveness of discussed translations but in Crane's method of approaching them. Crane describes one translation by Robert Nye (incidentally, titled *Beowulf: A New Telling*) which "retells rather than translates *Beowulf*, freely rearranging and omitting sections when he deems it necessary", but nonetheless—and in spite of his own ambivalence about the issue—Crane includes it in his discussion of translations (Crane 1970: 325). In Crane's eyes, "every translation is a new art"; the only difference between Nye and a less free translator is their interest in exploring the possibility of that new art (Crane 1970: 332). John D. Niles, a *Beowulf* translator in his own right, has a similar reaction when discussing Raymond Oliver's translation, titled *Beowulf: A Likeness*. Niles gives an example of Oliver's translation adding new images—in this particular case, a man on a boat bailing while the rest of the sailors sit idle—but almost in spite of himself judges that "These latter additions are not gratuitous. . . At work here is more than an imitator's license for free play", recognising that Oliver's additions are

serving a specific literary purpose within the translation (Niles 1993: 874). And similarly, Niles also classifies Oliver's work as a translation.

Both Niles and Crane also include a caveat that seems appropriate: that different types of readers may be looking for different types of translations. A reader in search of an engaging translation has a very different set of needs and expectations than a reader learning the source language and looking for a translation to aid her exploration of the source text. Seen from this standpoint, marking a translation as a version or an imitation seems less a disclaimer and more an indication of sub-genre, much as some books subtitle themselves as “a novel”. Calling this text 'a' translation does not distance the text from its status as a translation; rather, it indicates to a potential reader what sort of translation she may expect.

1.2: Original Writing

This thesis discusses the relationship between translation and original writing by examining the processes of translating *Beowulf* and of my own original writing. As such, a theory of original writing needs to be articulated, and again, because the subjectivity of the process is a crucial part of the analysis, at this point I will briefly speak in an explicit first person in order to describe a typical progression of poem composition.

My original poetry leans heavily towards narrative, and inspiration for a poem often comes from sources unconnected on a personal level: newspaper articles and history books are common geneses for poems. Once a central idea for a poem arises, be it that of portraying a specific moment or an entire narrative arc, the next step is to write out a few exploratory lines. These often do not make it into the finished draft of the poem, but rather serve as test lines to see where the rhythm of the poem is falling; a form and/or meter is typically chosen within the first few lines of composition. Once a form is settled upon, the rest of the first draft is completed. Editing a poem is almost without exception mostly comprised of pruning from a bulky first draft towards a sparer final poem. My tendency is towards wordiness and overexplanation; most second and third drafts involve removing lines, words, and occasionally entire stanzas.

The other aspect of my original writing significant to this project is the fact that much of it is not couched in a first-person narrative that can be explicitly associated with its author. Poems are

often written in the voice of a character, and even in poems in which a first-person narrator is speaking about experiences (factual or emotional) which have actually happened, there is often a distance between the narrative voice and the poem's action. Most poems are written in the voice of someone choosing to shape a narrative, regardless of how closely that narrator can or cannot be identified with me. One example of this is “Brownout,” a poem written several years ago:

Brownout

By ten pm the temperature has dropped to ninety-three degrees.
Part of the city raises its head into a quiet second life: older cars,
their batteries and radiators throttled into stalling in the afternoon heat,

will turn over this late. Drive-through lanes and Cost-U-Less carparks
fill up. The late-shift stockboys, refilling rows of gallon milk cartons,
sit back on their heels and watch their work disappear into shopping carts

and out the door. Sprinklers are screwed onto hoses and turned on
in darkness that lets the water sink—in the press of the afternoon,
the water evaporates before it sinks into the hard-packed dirt of the lawn.

An old woman lies on a sheet-covered couch with her body in bloom,
blood hovering just below her skin like petals pausing, gaining strength,
waiting to open. Her rattling, sweaty breaths dissipate like perfume

lifting off a body. In the shopping mall, a single bat laps the length
of the building, above the grilles holding the storefronts closed,
alone with the overchilled air, settling into the night and his own wind.

This poem came out of my own memories of Fresno, California, the city where I grew up. Summers there are brutally hot, and during one particular summer, the energy crisis in California meant that rolling blackouts and partial blackouts, called brownouts, occurred periodically throughout the city. The specific image that sparked the poem is of the bat flying through the shopping mall in the last stanza; I saw a bat flying through a shopping mall years before, and the image lingered. That memory is also associated with summertime in general; on the hottest days of the year the shopping mall is one of the coolest places in town, and a lot of people wander around it to get out of the heat. The two ideas—the heat of summer, and my own memory of the bat—are unconnected on a temporal level, but are connected in my head by the physical location of the shopping mall.

The original first lines of the poem were about a power outage, but were cut from the final draft. While much of the poem is from its first draft, the terza rima form was chosen around line four or five; the poem originally began as unrhymed three-line stanzas, but after noticing an unintentional rhyme in the first stanza of “degrees” and “heat” I decided terza rima’s looping, repetitive form worked well with the poem’s subject matter. The compositional process of a poem typically is not remembered quite this clearly; this poem was written shortly after moving to England, and it was the first poem that required choosing between British and American terms for the same object or situation. In America, the use of “carparks” in the fourth line would be replaced with “parking lot,” but once the poem was set out as a terza rima, the British term was kept since it made the rhyme work. It is undoubtedly incongruous to use a foreign term for a parking lot in California, but it survived to the final draft.

Most of the images in the poem are taken from my own memories of grocery shopping and watering a front lawn. Even the “sheet-covered couches” in the fourth stanza are from a personal memory of putting a fresh sheet over furniture to make it a bit cooler to sit on. The old woman, however, is there because when this poem was written, there was a heat wave in Europe that killed several older men and women in France; I had read about it in the newspaper, and used it to create the woman in the poem.

This poem is also indicative of a typical narrative strategy: while the poem is describing many images and events which are personal, the focus is not on a first-person story, but on a more removed description of an event or atmosphere. In a poem like this, the poem is shaped by choosing which images to focus on or stories to tell; it is as if I am curating my life and environment, choosing which pieces of my background make it to the exhibition of the poem.

A second poem, “In the Tokkotai Squadron,” is an example of a poem written in the voice of a character explicitly unconnected to the author:

In the Tokkotai Squadron

“When I see my uniform, I feel like getting back into that plane . . . But I also think that the time for pilots like me has passed.” –Shigeyoshi Hamazono, the *Guardian*, 28 February 2006

i.

So much less fuel this time,

I imagine it as a bottle in my hands—
these palm-lengths, this cup

the engineers dawdle
over the repairs. I clean my goggles
over and over, exhaling
to watch my breath fog up

ii.

I may matter, I may not, it will not matter
to me—I am the gesture, the curving spine,

reaching arms, a mother makes
between her child

and the oncoming car—like love
could change physics, could be a steel cage,
a hole in the ground to swallow them.

iii.

the sky is clouded for the curve in
as the names swing away,
Hirohito, Zero, Kyushu—

Mother—
that's the only word

there are seconds left

As the epigraph indicates, this poem was a response to a newspaper article about kamikaze pilots who had survived World War II (McCurry 2006). One of the pilots' description of the final seconds of his flight, "Mother—that's the only word", ended up being used in the final section of the poem, and it was that desire to use such a brief and disjointed phrase that led to the decision to write the poem in short, often unconnected phrases. Some of the images of the poem come from the article; for example, Mr. Hamazono is quoted as saying "It was more like a mother who drops everything when her child needs her. That's how the kamikaze felt about their country," which was used in the second section of the poem as an image of a mother attempting to shield her child from a car with her own arms. Many of the other images are less autobiographical than the examples in "Brownout", but many of the details are from my own memories: the description of cleaning goggles and breath fogging up comes from how I clean my own glasses, and the lines "the curve in/ as the names swing away", while intended as a description of a plane aiming itself

at a ship, comes more from memories of watching the ground recede as my plane took off from the San Francisco airport (where each plane heading to London takes off towards the Pacific, before swinging around to cross back onto land). The last line of the poem, “there are seconds left,” is also taken from Mr. Hamazono's interview; in it, he says “You have only seconds left.” In this poem, though, to use the quote as he said it would put an implied distance between the narrator and the pilot; the rest of the poem was written in the voice of a pilot, and to suddenly use a “you” rather than an “I,” even though that second-person reference was still about the pilot, would create a distance that didn’t fit with the emotional immediacy of the rest of the poem.

To take a step further back, then, my original writing seems to be very interested in the question of poetic voice. Many of the formal aspects of any poem are determined by the voice of whatever character I am attempting to embody, and are settled on very early in the compositional process. I consistently write in a voice at least partially different or distant from myself, but find a productive creative tension in allowing my own background and experience to fill in the more tangible details of each narrator's world.

1.3 Theories of Translation

As previously mentioned, free translations are more likely to be produced when the author comes to translation from the field of creative writing. This is an important detail to note because at this point the vast majority of creative writing M.A. and M.F.A. programmes are structured as a workshop format: a writer's work is presented, and a discussion follows based almost exclusively on a nuts-and-bolts level of evaluation of the work. Questions raised tend to be entirely practical: why was that word chosen above possible alternatives? What effect does the pattern of line or stanza breaks attempt to elicit? Would this poem work better in a different verse form? The questions, and ensuing debates, rarely broaden enough to even admit a discussion of whether the poem can be considered a success—given that the author of the poem is inevitably sitting silently in the midst of the discussion, this is unsurprising—and the issue of the theory behind a strategy of poem-writing is rarely, if ever, raised (Light 2002). A generalized articulation of an entire body of work, or even a particular poem, is often considered suspect. This is not brought up merely to bemoan the lack of more rigorous theoretical inquiry within the creative writing academy; it is mentioned because it seems significant that to translators familiar with the creative writing approach to pedagogy (whether as students or, in the case of poets such as Simon Armitage and

Don Paterson, teachers), there is a distinct divide between the practicalities of creative writing and the often negatively viewed theories of the study of literature and translating. It is worth questioning how much these authors' disavowals of their own translating work come out of real insight into their actions, and how much of it is rooted in an approach to studying creative writing that treats theoretics as a sign of weakness and overworking.

Similarly, introductions to translation often come as part of students' studies of language, and thus are typically associated with notions of equivalence; if a student is initially taught translation as a word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase exchange in grammar school, making the intellectual leap into the current state of scholarship, which is a far more nuanced field, requires not just learning new ideas but discarding often long-entrenched ones (Leeman & Rabin 2007).

This project is an attempt to explore the relationship between translation and creative writing, to articulate how free translations are situated as a distinct translation cluster, and to describe that cluster as a type of creative writing that brings in a source text as a particular type of constraint. Its main focus has been the production of a full translation of *Beowulf*; including an explicitly articulated discussion of the process of its translation.

1.4 A Translation Timeline

This introduction has set out initial questions to be explored, as well as situating the project within the context of free translations—more specifically, free translations produced by translators who approached the process of translation from a background of creative writing. Because this thesis is particularly interested in translation as a process, it has been necessary to open with a discussion of the creative writing background of this specific project.

Chapter 2 is a grounding in the history of *Beowulf* and its translation. It includes a discussion of Old English literature in general and the salient features of Old English poetry; a history of the *Beowulf* manuscript; an overview of the history of translating *Beowulf*; a more in-depth examination of modern *Beowulf* translators, including a more detailed look at two translators, Seamus Heaney and Kevin Crossley-Holland, whose approaches to their respective translations were particularly pertinent to the concerns of this project. The overall focus of Chapter 2 is outlining how the text of *Beowulf*, as well as its histories as a text and as a translation, raise

questions that encouraged certain strategies used when producing a new *Beowulf* translation. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the theories of translation that have influenced this translation, and the initial portion of each section in Chapter 3 outlines a particular concern or strategy, before moving on in the second portion to a discussion of how those concerns and strategies were eventually expressed in the final translation. Chapter 4 presents the finished translation of *Beowulf*. Chapter 5 returns to the discussion of creative writing, and presents a final articulation of how translation might be viewed not as a separate kind of writing, but as a way of writing creatively.

2: *Beowulf* Histories and Translations

Just as one does not (or perhaps should not?) need to be an expert in Old English literature to read *a* translation of *Beowulf*, one should not need to be an expert in it to read *about* a particular translation. However, because of the ways in which *Beowulf*'s background informed and encouraged certain questions in the translating process, a certain amount of grounding is helpful. Because this project was undertaken by an author already familiar with both *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon literature as a whole, a similar grounding in Old English poetry can illuminate why certain questions were given particular prominence during the process of translation.

To produce a translation of *Beowulf* requires the translator to grapple with the same questions she wishes her translation to ask of its reader. In other words, the dilemmas raised as part of the 'internal' translating process are the same dilemmas imposed on whatever final translation is produced. Some of the attributes are related to the poem itself. As will be mentioned in the following more thorough discussion of the background of the poem, many critics, Francis P. Magoun most prominently, argue that *Beowulf* began as a poem that was performed rather than read; if we agree with Magoun's argument that *Beowulf* is an example of oral-formulaic composition (Magoun 1991: 54), then an intrinsic part of the poem is that it would have quite literally been different with every hearing. Magoun argues that the use of repeated phrases and syntactical structures indicate the poem was performed on the fly with a basic plot outline which was embellished and expanded using set phrases and structures that the poet would have deployed as necessary; the percentage of reiterated verse within *Beowulf* has been estimated at around sixteen percent in both 1955, by Creed, and 1986 by John D. Niles (O'Keeffe 1997: 89). It is worth pointing out that Magoun's assessment of *Beowulf*'s compositional process is far from accepted; critics such as John S. Miletech have argued that while it does use formulaic phrasing, it doesn't utilise those phrases frequently enough to qualify as an oral-formulaic composition, and was instead a product of "learned, written technique" (O'Keeffe 1997: 102). Given this project's focus on the translator's role as interpreter who brings her own experiences and allusions into the translatable process, though, the idea (contentious as it may be) that *Beowulf* could have been a story which was elaborated and embellished upon by different performing poets—that every experience of the *Beowulf* poem would have been a unique experience affected directly by the poet doing the telling—was obviously an intriguing aspect of the poem.

It should be mentioned that while *Beowulf's* background does contribute to these questions in a direct way, a source text does not require a history of individual performances or a tradition of poetic manipulation in order to justify a translation which alters or elaborates upon descriptive aspects of the source text. Every prospective source text does not need to somehow give its consent to the degree to which it is translated. In this case, though, it is opportune that questions were central to the process of translation—questions about the individuality of reading and writing and about the inevitability of the writer's presence in both translating and writing—were already part of the *Beowulf* critical discourse. As will be discussed later in this chapter, past translations of *Beowulf* have made the translator's presence an explicit aspect of the translation; to use *Beowulf* as the source text for a project interested in the creative voice of the translator would mean entering into a dialogue about that very issue with past translations in a potentially productive way

In addition, the history of *Beowulf* as a translation is tied to the history of translation itself. As will be explored in more detail later, *Beowulf* only began to be translated at the beginning of the 19th century. In fact, *Beowulf's* translations begin in precisely the period in which translation began being devalued as an artistic form; Bassnett describes it as the beginnings of the debate over whether translation could be defined as a “creative or as a mechanical enterprise” (Bassnett 1988: 68), when writers such as Goethe, Coleridge, and Schlegel began differentiating between types of translation and other forms of writing by the amounts of imagination or creativity required for each. *Beowulf* has not passed through English literature or entered the literary canon by way of a continued presence in translation that echoes historical trends. Contrast this to, for example, *The Iliad*, whose translations from Chapman to Pope to Fagles have entered into English literature in their own right. In fact, *Beowulf's* status as a text with artistic merit has often been in question, with the Greek epics used as a benchmark which *Beowulf* could not possibly match; a large portion of J.R.R. Tolkien's seminal essay “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” is dedicated to refuting the arguments of scholars like Ker, who wrote of *Beowulf's* style that “[t]old in this way the story of Theseus or Hercules would still have much more in it” (Fry 1968: 18).

Beowulf was produced by an unknown author or authors, from a literature of which we have very limited knowledge, and has spent most of the intervening centuries unread and untranslated. *Beowulf* has emerged so far removed from its composition that it seems, much like

the legendary king Scyld Scefing whose story opens the poem, to have landed on our shores without any history at all. *Beowulf's* presence in English literature has been explicitly *as a translation*. Because of that explicitness, the history of *Beowulf's* translation is tied extremely closely to the history of translation itself, and thus to discuss the former means following expectations of and assumptions about translation, and what translation does, over the intervening two hundred years.

This chapter provides background on those aspects of *Beowulf's* history that affected the process of its translation, and explains why those aspects in particular are compelling areas of discussion. First, the history of Old English as a language with several subsumed dialects is briefly discussed. Examples of Old English literature that have survived through to modernity are given, and a history of the *Beowulf* manuscript itself is provided. Also included in this historical grounding is a discussion of Old English poetic form, including meter, syllabic patterns, and distinctive linguistic features of Old English poetry. Finally there is a discussion of translations of *Beowulf*, moving from the first complete (and problematic) translation by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin in 1815 through to modern translations, with a special focus on Seamus Heaney and Kevin Crossley-Holland's respective translations, and what factors of their translations make them particularly relevant to this project.

2.1: Anglo-Saxon Literature

The most important thing to know about Old English literature is the overwhelming extent of what we do not know. The speakers of Old English, Anglo-Saxons, were the dominant ethnic group(s) of England for six hundred years, from the mid-5th century until the Norman Conquest of 1066. Old English comprises four main dialects: Mercian, Northumbrian, Kentish, and West Saxon, each associated with independent kingdoms within what is now England (Marckwardt 1972: 178). On top of these four distinct dialects, the passage of time led to significant changes within each dialect; for example, Early West Saxon and Late West Saxon differ so tremendously that it is believed Late West Saxon did not directly descend from Early West Saxon at all (Hogg 2002: 9). The relative uniformity (all things considered) of what we do have of Old English literature is largely the work of Alfred the Great, king of Wessex from 871 until his death in 899. In addition to reorganising the military and civic institutions within Wessex in order to successfully repel Viking invasions and compiling the laws of his kingdom into a Doom Book

(from *dom*, the Old English word for law), during his reign Alfred embarked upon a massive project to standardise the language of government and the Church as Old English, as well as have translated into Old English texts he felt were "most necessary for all men to know" (this translated phrase, "*niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne*," is taken from Alfred's Preface to his own translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* (Marsden 2004: 35)). The bulk of surviving Old English literature, unsurprisingly, is written in the West Saxon dialect. The idea of "Old English" as a language, then, actually encompasses a collection of disparate dialects.

One important aspect of the translation of *Beowulf* produced for this project is its use of different modern dialects and registers; this approach was inspired by the dialectical aspects of Old English. Dialects and registers are obviously different varieties of language: a dialect is a specific form of language used by a speech community (which can be delineated along regional or social lines), while register refers to a variety of language used in a particular social setting or for a particular purpose (for example, the way one might speak while giving a professional presentation versus the way one speaks while with friends—both of these are types of register). Despite their difference, though, the way in which both dialect and register can mark its user with a particular regional, cultural, or social identity is similar; Butler has referred to the fact that the term "social dialect" has been used to describe types of language equally definable as register (St. John Butler 1999: 170). There is also a tradition within translation of deliberately using changing registers in a target language to "compensate for the loss of connotations carried by the ST dialect" (Dickins, Hervey & Higgins 2002: 168)—in other words, attempting to convey information or characterisation originally encoded in the source text's use of dialect, which often has no comparable dialect in the target language, by using different registers within the target text. Because of this tradition, and because of the ways English has developed since its Old English permutations, in this translation dialect and register are amalgamated to a certain extent. The dialects of Old English are packed together quite closely, both geographically and temporally, in a way that could not exist today; because of any number of modern technologies (rapid transportation, instantaneous communications, and mass media, among others), language has become standardised to a large extent. What were different dialects in Anglo-Saxon England, then, could be 'translated' to modern differences in slang terms. Echoing the source language's varied dialects with different modern English dialects and registers and, occasionally, words that might not be necessarily understood by all readers (such as a few moments in the final translation where the original Old English text is used untranslated and unglossed) was a way not only to call

attention to the way in which we often consolidate and standardise other languages and cultures as a unified 'foreign', but also allowed the translation to use multiple distinct voices without making the characters behind those voices the main focus. The introduction of a new voice, in other words, is not conveyed by describing a new character's appearance or his or her background; it is indicated by a different sort of speech. This keeps the reader's attention on the shifting thread of narrative and voice; to be constantly unsure of who is speaking is to be also constantly aware that the story is being related subjectively. Old English's dialects and Alfred's efforts to standardise Old English are particularly interesting because of the backgrounds of many *Beowulf* translators. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, Seamus Heaney's translation includes several explicitly Irish English word choices, and he has written about how important it was to him to create a *Beowulf* that contained a sense of the history, and specifically Anglo-Irish history, that has passed in between his source text and target text. The translation produced for this project occasionally utilises American words or phrases for similar reasons, but perhaps more intriguing were the moments in which translation highlighted words and phrases which are unconsciously weighted with geographic baggage—incidents when a phrase was identified as “too American” or “too British” when, by strict word histories, they would not necessarily be identified as such. Old English has been described as comprising “varieties which speakers tended to favour, rather than fixed standard languages to which speakers were required to adhere” compelling (Hogg 2002: 126). Alfred may have been moderately successful in regulating English, at least for his government, but the language itself continued to change and evolve; because that tension between standardisation and divergence was tremendously important to Old English at the time of *Beowulf*'s composition, that tension is reflected in its translations.

Beowulf's history as a manuscript is notable because of how little we know about it, and how many people have played a part in its presentation as a poem. From six hundred years of Anglo-Saxon dominance, approximately four hundred manuscripts have survived (Mitchell & Robinson 1986: 141). That number encompasses *all* manuscripts, not exclusively poetry: hagiographies, prose, and lists of saints are all included. There are four major manuscript collections: the Junius manuscript (also referred to as the Caedmon manuscript because of a now-discredited theory that its contents were the work of Caedmon), an illustrated poetic anthology; the Exeter Book, an anthology of poems and riddles donated to Exeter Cathedral in 1050; the Vercelli Book (named for its location in Italy), a mix of poetry and prose; and the Nowell Codex, named after its owner Laurence Nowell, who inscribed his name on the first page in the mid-sixteenth century. The

Nowell Codex is in actuality two separate volumes bound together at some point in the seventeenth century; the first volume, from the twelfth century, contains four prose pieces. The second contains three prose works (a life of Saint Christopher, a description of distant lands containing fabulous creatures, and a translation of a letter to Aristotle), *Judith* (a poem recounting a portion of the book of Judith), and *Beowulf*. Andrew Orchard has hypothesised that these five disparate texts were compiled together because of their common theme of monsters or monstrous behaviour (Sisam 1953: 66). The *Beowulf* manuscript was transcribed at some point between 700 and 1000 CE, and is written in a melange of Mercian, Northumbrian, Kentish, Early West Saxon, and Late West Saxon dialects (Kiernan 1996: 162). It was transcribed by two separate scribes: Scribe A, who began the transcription, and Scribe B, who proofread the work of Scribe A along with his own and took over the transcription at line 1939 (Newton 1994: 2). The provenance of *Beowulf* and the Nowell Codex prior to Nowell's ownership is unknown. After Nowell, the Codex passed to Sir Robert Cotton, who catalogued it in his library as Cotton Vitellius A. xv, according to his cataloguing system of identifying books by the busts of classical authors under which they were located. In 1731, the manuscript was damaged as a result of a fire in the Cotton library. The original damage was compounded by a restoration effort that did not begin until the 19th century; several margins and edges are irreparably damaged, and portions of the manuscript have missing words or portions that cannot be recovered.

Any text is affected and enriched by the number of people involved in its production and history; the *Beowulf* manuscript, moreover, is characterised both in its composition and its interpretive history by involving groups of people, and that multiplicity of viewpoints and voices is a fact central to its meaning. The fact that there were two scribes involved in *Beowulf*'s composition/transcription encouraged a similarly multi-voiced route in its translation that Old English's many dialects had also pointed towards. *Beowulf*'s history of proofreading and editing as an integral part of the source text also indicates that reading and responding could be a productive part of not just the translating process, but of the translation itself. And finally, the way in which *Beowulf* was categorised by its later owners is a fascinating aspect of its history; for example, if we agree with Orchard's argument that *Beowulf* was collated with the other texts because of a central theme of monstrosity (Orchard 2003), a translation which highlighted the monsters within the *Beowulf* story and thus encouraged recognition of that aspect of *Beowulf*'s existence could be a productive approach to its interpretation. A more pertinent example is the question of how to approach the physical deterioration of the manuscript: how does a translator

translate not just silence, but a silence imposed by things wholly outside the text? This translation aimed to differentiate the silence of a missing word from the silence of a reference we no longer understand. Past translators, Heaney included, have utilised ellipses to indicate missing text (Heaney 2000: 151); this translation uses blank space and references by the narrator to not being able to speak. These types of silent moments are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, but are mentioned now because the final strategy was informed not just by the particular circumstances of physical damage to the manuscript, but by the other aspects of *Beowulf*—that Old English is made up of different voices, and that its translation therefore should encompass multiple voices—that have been previously mentioned. By turning the missing text from a gap in presented information to a gap in *communicated* information, the translation speaks to not just that individual problematic moment in *Beowulf*, but also to the issues surrounding *Beowulf* as a whole.

Just as *Beowulf*'s transcription is shrouded in mystery, its composition is equally ambiguous. There are two major schools of thought on how *Beowulf* came to be written down. One argument is that *Beowulf* was composed for a literate culture, in the way modern audiences are used to thinking about composition: an author creating and refining a work for the page. Part of the basis for this argument is the sophistication of the language and imagery in the poem; Alistair Campbell writes that "the carefully wrought paragraphs of the Old English epic style were certainly intended for preservation, and it follows that the poems were composed for record in writing" (Campbell 1962: 20). The other argument is based strongly in Milman Parry's work studying how the Homeric epics could have survived being passed along purely orally, and seeking to explain why certain phrases were used repeatedly. In Parry's theory of oral-formulaic construction, an oral poet has several stock phrases memorized which are easily adaptable to particular descriptive or syntactic needs, and that fit into his metrical form of choice. The poet then can deploy those phrases repeatedly to aid extempore performance (Parry 1971). Francis P. Magoun applied Parry's theory to *Beowulf*, and argued that the recurrence of "an appreciable number of formulas or formulaic phrases" in *Beowulf* meant that it, too, must have originally been composed orally (Magoun 1991: 84). This argument has quite a lot of textual evidence to support it; approximately every fifth verse of *Beowulf* is repeated at least one other time in the poem, and opposing critics acknowledge that this high percentage of repeated phrases is present, but suggest that the rate of repetition should be even higher in order to support a theory of oral-formulaic composition (Creed 1966). Magoun also argued that the three main plot arcs were

actually three separate folk poems, which had been linked together into the one larger narrative of *Beowulf* by "an anthologizing scribe" (Magoun 1958: 100).

While the debate over the *Beowulf* poet remains contentious, the oral-formulaic theory for *Beowulf*'s composition is at least moderately persuasive, and this theory of multiple poets having been direct contributors to the final source text that has survived is another aspect of how *Beowulf*'s background has contributed to the approach this translation uses. If *Beowulf* was written down by an author working from generations of oral poets who had contributed to its story and language, then a translation that made distinct narrative voices explicit within the poem could be one way of emphasizing that aspect of its composition and survival. Multiplying the narrators within a translation would potentially call attention to the unknown number of poets whose voices were consolidated during the process of its transition from oral to literary work.

2.2: Anglo-Saxon Poetic Forms

There is essentially only one basic form of Anglo-Saxon poetic meter, and it is a form very different from how modern English speakers understand the notion of poetry. In modern English, we measure poetic meter very differently; furthermore, there are multitudes of different meter and rhyme combinations (some being a combination of no rhyme and no meter!) that are still acknowledged as poetry. In Old English, there is one basic metric line that makes up poetry; there are several different patterns of alliteration that can be used, but the essential definition of what makes a text poetry is very clear and very constrained. It is important to understand that difference because deciding how to approach what R.M. Liuzza describes as "the tension and interplay between an older verse-form and a modern ear" (Liuzza 2000: 212) is a much bigger decision than it would be if the languages being translated were, for example, from German to English. While obviously different languages fit into certain metrical schemes more or less easily (for example, iambic meter is popular in modern English because English's limited inflectional endings often fit naturally into that meter), if a translator chooses to retain a rhyme scheme from the source text, because we as modern English readers are familiar with the concept of rhyming as a facet of poetry, the target text presents itself as a poem. Old English poetry, on the other hand, uses a form that is no longer widely recognized as poetry, so to choose to retain that meter is to decide upon a form that potentially alienates or confuses a large portion of the target text's readership. The eventual approach used in this project was to translate *Beowulf* into several

different modern poetic forms, but to retain a less rigid adherence to certain aspects (for example, alliteration) of the original Old English poetry. Because several details of the original poetic form shaped the final translation, they will be discussed in more depth here than they might be in a survey of Old English poetry provided for a more general context.

Old English is essentially modern English, plus or minus some historical vowel shifts, with the subtraction of any and all French influence. This is manifestly an extremely abbreviated and simplified way of putting it, but it is mentioned because it is worth remembering that Old English is, despite its intensely intimidating exterior, in some ways recognisable as English. For example, the Lord's Prayer in Old English is, in sections, clearly recognisable to a Modern English reader:

Fæder ure,
þu þe eart on heofonum,
si þin nama gehalgod.
Tobecume þin rice.
Gewurpe ðin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg.
And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum.
And ne gelæd þu us on costnunge,
ac alys us of yfele. Soplice.

If the words are heard rather than read—several websites and online videos illustrate this (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WI-OZ3breE>, last accessed 15/11/10, is one of many recordings presented on YouTube)—the connection is even clearer. Old English retains much more of its Germanic roots than does modern English, and in syntactic structure and inflectional endings is much more similar to modern German than to modern English; modern English has lost the majority of its morphology, while modern German has retained it (Mitchell 1995: 25). Its prose tends to be much more accessible to a reader new to Old English for a few reasons, but the primary reason for that is that Old English prose uses a much more informal (and, to our eyes, recognisable) diction than Old English poetry, which follows quite rigid and distinctive structures that are unfamiliar to a modern English speaker.

Old English poetic meter differs from modern English poetry in that it is measured purely by its accented syllables. Modern English's current accentual-syllabic meter is a mixture of this original metric form, which Old English shares with all the older Germanic languages, and the post-Conquest French influence of syllabic meter. The Old English poetic line is four stressed

syllables, marked by a pause, or caesura, in the middle; what is important to remember is that any unstressed syllables just don't count—the rhythm is formed purely by the accented syllables, regardless of how close or far apart they fall from one another in each respective line. Below is a rough road-map of an Old English poetic line:

A-stress B-stress (caesura) C-stress D-stress

In the above line, A, B, C, and D are each of the stressed syllables in the line; there may a varying number of unstressed syllables between them, but they do not affect the metrical beat. Eduard Siever in 1893 laid out the five most common schematics of Old English half-lines, diagramming the patterns of stresses within each (Pulsiano & Treharne 2001: 459). This is the biggest difference between the modern English concept of poetic meter and the Old English one. In modern English, meter is made up of small units, or "feet," of patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables; for example, an iambic foot is a pattern of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The overall meter is determined by looking at the type of feet used, and the number of feet in each line; a poem made up of iambs, where there are five iambic feet in each line, is therefore classified as iambic pentameter. In Old English poetry, the number of feet in the line never changes, and because unstressed syllables are not considered whatsoever in terms of the meter, the number of unstressed syllables can change drastically from line to line. For example, the Christopher Marlowe poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is written in iambic tetrameter. The first stanza reads:

Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dale and field,
And all the craggy mountains yield.
(Payne & Hunter 2003: 714)

Each line is made up of four iambic feet. Compare that meter to the anapaestic tetrameter of Clement Clark Moore's "Twas the Night Before Christmas":

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.
(Wormell 2010: 1)

To a modern English reader, these two poems register as similar, but still markedly distinct rhythms. If they are evaluated using Anglo-Saxon concepts of poetic meter, however, they would be considered identical because each line contains four stressed syllables. (This discussion of Old English metrics is a greatly simplified one, simply because the details of how Old English poetic meter could or should be diagrammed in more detail is beyond the scope of this project; for more in-depth analyses of meter, see Russom 1987, Cable 1974, Creed 1990.) It's worth pointing out that sprung rhythm is much more similar to Old English meter, since it does not count unstressed syllables (Gerard Manley Hopkins also uses a consistent number of stresses in each line, which makes this similarity particularly noticeable); however, a metrical foot in sprung rhythm always begins with a stressed syllable, whereas because Old English meter does not measure itself in metrical feet, the stressed syllable can occur at any point (Hennessy Vendler 1995: 9).

Another main aspect of Old English poetry is its use of alliteration. If we return to the diagram of an Old English line provided above, the C-stress syllable should alliterate with either the A- or B-stresses (which is determined by strength; the C-stress syllable alliterates with the stronger stress), while the D-stress should *not* alliterate with either A or B (Hogg 2002: 122).

To give a final example of the enormous differences between old English and modern English poetry, here are the first three lines of Ezra Pound's translation of "The Seafarer," an Old English lament.

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.
(Xie 1999: 207)

This is, perhaps, an extreme example; in this translation Pound did not merely attempt to preserve the formal features of Old English poetry, but the specific sound effects of the source text.

However, the result is modern English verse that sounds remarkably like Old English poetry. It is interesting to note that Pound's efforts were met with attacks on his Old English scholarship and criticisms of a poetic style described as "obtrusive" (Xie 1999: 207); Pound's audience, at least, found a modern version of Old English poetry unpersuasive.

Old English literature is also notable because of a sub-vocabulary that seems to have been reserved solely for its poetry (Quirk 1975: 7). Portions of the Old English lexicon are unique to its poetry, typically descriptive terms for weapons, armour, or other nouns; for example, while "sweord" is instantly recognizable to a modern English speaker as "sword," other options open to the Anglo-Saxon poet included "brand" and "mece" (Quirk 1975: 7). Perhaps the best-known linguistic hallmark of Old English poetry, particularly after Seamus Heaney's discussion of it in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, is the use of "kennings": single-word metaphors describing one thing in terms of another; a well-known example is using the term "hron-rād," or "whale-road" (Heaney 2000: 3) to describe the sea. Water was a particularly popular subject for kennings; three other representative examples from *Beowulf* and *The Seafarer* refer to it as the "swan's road" (Heaney 2000: 15), "whale-way" (Xie 207), and "sail-road" (Heaney 2000: 99). Another descriptive strategy is the use of variation: several different metaphors or descriptions are packed tightly one after the other to describe a central image. Perhaps because of this tendency to group comparative images together, Old English poetry is notable for its dependence on metaphor rather than simile; rather than explicitly comparing one thing to another—for example, saying that the sea was like a path for swans—the strategy was instead to just describe a ship sailing on the swan-road. *Beowulf* as a whole contains just five similes. The motivation for using metaphors rather than similes is most likely rooted in space constraints; Old English poetry's strategy of using concentrated bursts of images in relatively short poetic lines does not easily allow the extended diction required for simile. However, the use of metaphor in *Beowulf* is particularly significant in the way in which, as modern metaphor theorists argue, the metaphors used can be read as a window into how an Anglo-Saxon audience understood its world. As argued by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* and since developed by many other theorists, metaphor "does not occur primarily in language but in thought" (Kövecses 2005: 2): the metaphors we use to describe our world actually express how we understand it. In other words, the *Beowulf* poet does not repeatedly describe the ocean as a road for whales or a sail-path because he is part of a culture which uses water as one of its main methods of transportation; he has written a poem about seagoing heroes because he comes from a culture which sees the ocean as a road for whales. One fundamental way to attempt to translate the world of *Beowulf*, then, is to speak about it in the same way, where a sea is not something to be driven around or flown over, but travelled on (see Lakoff 1980). Furthermore, while metaphor and simile are both ways of looking at the relationship between two entities, metaphor expresses those two entities as a blend of one another, while simile is a more direct comparison of the two, thereby emphasising

their separate natures (Steen 2007). While metaphor use in Old English poetry may have originally been motivated more by form than function, the idea that it resulted in one domain that had to be “incorporated into the encompassing language of the target domain” (Steen 2007: 320) is a linguistic and conceptual reflection of the types of overlapping narratives and voices that was used extensively in this translation.

One last aspect of Old English poetry discussed here because of its importance to this *Beowulf* translation is an affinity for litotes: expressing a thought by negating its opposite, such as describing something as “not bad,” or otherwise deliberately understating a fact in order to emphasise it. What is probably the best-known example of this use of understatement in *Beowulf* comes early on in the poem, when Scyld Scefing, a tremendously powerful and benevolent king, is described. The narrator sums up his rule by saying “*thaet waes god cyning*,” or “that was a good king.” As has become clear to the audience by this point, Scyld was a far superior ruler than merely “good”; the narrator deliberately understates an obvious point for effect. This also creates a collusive moment between narrator and audience; in order for the humour of this moment to work, the audience must be aware that not only do they know that Scyld Scefing was well beyond just a good thing, but the *narrator* knows it as well.

This type of understatement involves the implicit “mention of a proposition” central to Sperber and Wilson's analysis of irony: the narrator is implicitly responding to the idea that Scyld Scefing was not a superlative ruler, and is ridiculing it (Sperber & Wilson 1981). It is also a somewhat more light-hearted example of other moments of irony in *Beowulf*, which more often involve what Fulk, Cain and Anderson describe as a “variety of contrast,” where an initial expectation comes up against a much more brutal truth (Fulk, Cain, & Anderson 2003: 32); an example of this in *Beowulf* is Grendel's initial expectation that Beowulf will be a tasty morsel to consume, only to be unpleasantly surprised when Beowulf is awake and ready for combat. The use of litotes in *Beowulf* involves the same sense of a bait-and-switch, but the expectation is implicit in the understatement rather than explicitly addressed, and is typically a difference of opinion played for laughs rather than a hope that violence can be avoided which is promptly disproved.

These moments in *Beowulf* are appealing because the way in which a well-deployed litotes provides a burst of humour within what was often a serious passage gave a natural opening to play with narrative register in the translation. In addition, the collusive moments created are

particularly interesting because they bring the relationship between the narrator and audience into conscious play. A main question of this translation was how to call attention to the geographical and historical space between the source and target cultures, and how different strategies of doing so would create varying effects in the finished translation. The litotes in *Beowulf* provide a moment where inserting an explicit translatorial presence seemed the best way to translate that explicit relationship between writer and reader, and so in this translation those moments are typically given special emphasis.

2.3: *Beowulf* Translations

The history of *Beowulf*'s translation is, unsurprisingly, well-documented, considering how recently that history has begun. The first complete translation of *Beowulf* was by Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin; Thorkelin was also responsible for two transcriptions of *Beowulf* from its original manuscript, one created by himself and the other by a hired copyist, which have become valuable resources as the original manuscript deteriorates. Thorkelin published his Latin translation of *Beowulf* in 1815; while his transcriptions have continued to be an important textual resource, they contain numerous errors, which presumably contributed to a translation which his contemporaries considered riddled with inaccuracies (Osborn 1997: 344). Thorkelin also reworked the plot of *Beowulf* somewhat; in his version, Grendel is leading two rival tribes in threatening Hrothgar, and battles Beowulf three separate times. Thorkelin's translation also has Beowulf vanquishing the dragon at the end of the poem. While those alterations were perhaps mistakenly viewed as translating "mistakes" at the time, the fact remains that changes to the translation which seem to be motivated by mis-transcription of the source text rather than an overall translation strategy are a problematic aspect to Thorkelin's work. A Danish translation, by Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, followed in 1820, while J.M. Kemble produced a literal ("literal" refers to the fact that each line was translated as a discrete unit, so the source and target texts progress at the same rate) English translation in 1837 (Osborn 1997: 341). Since that time, *Beowulf* has been translated into English over one hundred times.

As previously mentioned, several of these translations have been freer versions, aimed at a non-academic reading audience. Raymond Oliver, Edwin Morgan, and Burton Raffel, among others, have all published translations known for varying levels of elaboration and paraphrase (See Morgan 1952, Raffel 1963, Oliver 1990). Kevin Crossley-Holland, who will be discussed shortly,

published a translation of *Beowulf* for children which added a narrative frame onto the story (Crossley-Holland 1982). Within the last fifty years, several more texts and films have been produced which, while basing their plots on the story of *Beowulf*, have experimented with the story in even more drastic ways. *Grendel*, John Gardner's 1971 novel, is a retelling of *Beowulf* that drastically changes the narrative voice. *Beowulf* is narrated by a semi-omniscient and anonymous narrator; while most of the poem is presented as a third-person narrative, there are several instances of the narrator saying 'I have heard of . . .' as a way of moving the plot into its next development. In Gardner's novel, the same basic plot is narrated entirely from Grendel's point of view. In this telling, Grendel is an intensely lonely monster; his mother lacks the capacity for language, and the sight of him frightens humans so much that they attack him instinctively. Rather than a heroic epic, Gardner moves the focus of the story to Grendel's struggle between hoping there is a greater meaning behind his existence and his alienation from and resulting anger towards other animals. Grendel encounters characters from *Beowulf* (among them his own mother, Unferth, and a dragon implied to be the same dragon who ultimately kills Beowulf), the focus of the novel is clearly on Grendel's internal mental conflict, and he encounters Beowulf himself only briefly at the end of the novel. In 1976, Michael Crichton published *Eaters of the Dead*, which merges an actual historical figure with a version of *Beowulf* that provides humanized versions of its monsters. Ahmad ibn Fadlan was a 10th-century Arabic writer who, as part of an embassy to the leader of the Volga Bulgars, encountered and wrote about people he referred to as the Rus, commonly accepted to have been Vikings. In Crichton's novel, Ahmad ibn Fadlan is the narrator who in the course of his travels as an ambassador is coerced into joining a Viking group led by a man named Buliwyf (i.e., Beowulf); they travel to a besieged hall, where it is revealed they are menaced by a tribe of Neanderthals (referred to by the Vikings as the "wendol") who have somehow survived in the surrounding primeval forest. A cinematic adaptation of Crichton's novel, *The 13th Warrior*, was one of five films released in the last ten years dealing with *Beowulf*. Two of the most recent are the 2008 film *Outlander*, in which Grendel is actually an alien who has crash-landed near a Viking settlement along with the protagonist who leads the Vikings in defeating him; and a computer-animated version, 2007's *Beowulf*, in which Grendel's mother (who also survives the film) is a shape-shifter who seduces both Hrothgar and Beowulf, and whose progeny with each are Grendel and the dragon, respectively. The 2007 movie is particularly interesting because it clearly attempts to keep the same aesthetic as the source text. Elements of the film's design such as characters' clothing and architecture are recognizably Anglo-Saxon; at one point Wealtheow, Hrothgar's queen, plays a

lyre, which is historically accurate for an Anglo-Saxon musician to play; Grendel even mutters to himself in Old English. The plot, however, diverges drastically from the original story: Grendel's mother, rather than being a monster, is a shape-shifter who typically reveals herself as a beautiful nude woman. She also departs from Anglo-Saxon notions of beauty by giving herself stiletto heels that seem to morph out of her bare feet. It is implied that Grendel is attacking Heorot not just because the men in it are hurting his ears (Grendel is given some sort of ear infection, and the noise of merrymaking from the hall causes him physical pain), but also because Hrothgar is his own father. Grendel's mother survives the story—another departure from the source text—and it is implied that she has survived by seducing each new king in turn and bearing his child.

Some of these translations or adaptations seem to be in keeping with a more general interest in exploring potential back stories to established narratives; Gregory Maguire's 1995 novel *Wicked*, which retells the story of *The Wizard of Oz* from the Wicked Witch of the West's point of view, seems an approach similar to Gardner's novel. Recent literary and cinematic adaptations of *Beowulf* in particular are interesting, though, because they tend to depart drastically from the details of the source text's plot while attempting to remain much more faithful to the historical aesthetic of the poem. Crichton's novel goes out of its way to root *Beowulf* in historical reality, while the 2007 film has Grendel speaking his own source language; there seems to be an interest in producing translations that retain *Beowulf*'s setting, but look at it from a modern viewpoint. It has been fascinating to see what versions of *Beowulf* have been created while this project was underway because of its concern with producing a translation that engaged with a modern viewpoint of a historical text. Other translations of *Beowulf* are also intriguing because, until recently, it has not been a particularly strong part of the public consciousness; a majority of university-educated adults would probably be able to give at least a broad outline of *The Odyssey*, but it is by no means as certain that *Beowulf* has been part of the popular literary canon in the same way. Niles dates *Beowulf*'s popularity to within the last century, arguing that it has become known as a poem at the same time the study of Old English has been shunted out of most undergraduate English courses, writing disconsolately that "The more the poem is read, the less it is read except in translation" (Niles 1993: 858). Associating this translation with the recent cinematic version in which the dragon is actually Beowulf's illegitimate son with Grendel's mother is not necessarily the most positive of relationships, but if one can assume an audience is familiar with the basic outline of a narrative, the feeling of responsibility towards that narrative is lessened. Venuti's argument that "the emergence of a canon of translated literature always

establishes possibilities for foreignising projects" seems to be coming into play with *Beowulf*—as the modern English audience becomes more familiar with it, more experimental translations and adaptations are becoming increasingly popular.

Two recent *Beowulf* translators have had a particular influence on this project: Seamus Heaney and Kevin Crossley-Holland. Researching this translation has involved encountering dozens of different *Beowulf* translations; Heaney and Crossley-Holland, however, are the two authors whose translations had made the greatest impression before this project was begun, and therefore exerted the greatest influence on how this project was approached. Each author's translation engages with some of the questions that have already been addressed in this chapter; Heaney's translation deals with issues of dialects, while Crossley-Holland's translation for children includes a particularly interesting take on multiple narrative voices. Furthermore, Heaney's translation is easily the best-known *Beowulf* translation of the last generation, and to produce a new translation, particularly one which is intended to stand in the same free translation field as Heaney's, unavoidably requires interaction with his text.

The Heaney *Beowulf* is an extremely popular translation, and one that is inextricably linked to Heaney himself—so much so that in academic circles, it is often referred to as “Heaneywulf”, a nickname that began as a pejorative but has since shifted to a more neutral acknowledgement of Heaney's effort “to mark the translation as his own poem” (Chickering 2002: 160). Heaney himself has acknowledged that his translation is “about one-third Heaney, two-thirds 'duty to the text'” (Gussow 2000: B4). The translation is subtitled “a new translation,” but it is important to note that despite Heaney's explicit acknowledgement of fairly significant changes made to the text, it is still regarded as a translation. In his review of Heaney's translation, Howell Chickering—a *Beowulf* translator himself—acknowledges Heaney's experimentation, but his only criticism is the decision to use Heaney's text as the *Beowulf* translation in the Norton Anthology; his argument is that the anthology is aimed at a more academic audience—namely, students encountering both the source and target texts for the first time—and Heaney's translation is better suited to a more general audience (Chickering 2002: 177); in other words, Chickering's problem with Heaney's translation is not that it does not belong in the larger cluster concept of translation, but that the textual apparatus surrounding it in the Norton anthology gives an inaccurate indication of where in the cluster it is situated.

Heaney's 1999 translation is also significant because of the questions it raises about what it means to translate an Old English poem as a modern American English speaker. Heaney's translation engages explicitly with the ways in which language can simultaneously emphasize our connections to and differences from other cultures. Heaney's interest in translating *Beowulf* was sparked by a single word, "*þolian*," an Old English word that had, in its modern incarnation as the verb "to those," been preserved in the vocabulary of his older relatives (Heaney 2000: xxiii). He also discusses in his introduction ties linking his own compositions to Old English; he describes "Digging," the first poem in his first collection, as "lines made up of two balancing halves, each half containing two stressed syllables . . . Part of me had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start" (Heaney 2000: xxiii). A large part of the rest of his translation, however, deals with the ways in which Old English and the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons are foreign to him as a Northern Irish writer, and the ways in which Old English has backward-reaching echoes from later British colonialism. At one point in his translation, Heaney refers to Heorot, the mead-hall central to the narrative of *Beowulf*, as a "bawn," a specifically and obviously Irish term. In his introduction, Heaney justifies his use of the word by writing "Putting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history which has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned" (Heaney 2000: xxx). In other words, Heaney was aware that his translation was affected by his status as someone whose own culture and language had been directly affected and, at least in the case of his language, *changed* by the culture and people that had produced *Beowulf*. The term 'bawn' is associated with the buildings built by English and Scottish colonists in northern Ireland specifically for the purpose of managing the surrounding Irish. To describe Heorot as a bawn, then, results in two things. Assuming the reader recognises the term, it creates an awareness of the history in between Heaney's translation and the original composition of *Beowulf*; it calls attention to the fact that Heaney as the translator is bringing his own experience into his translation, as well as reacting to the source text; and it asks the reader to evaluate Heaney's choice through the lens of their own experiences with and reactions to colonialism. It also potentially changes where the reader's sympathy lies—or is supposed to lie—in the story. Finally, it (to use Venuti's term for it) foreignises his translation by making salient the fact that it *is* a translation. There is a moment in the poem in which Grendel decides to attack Heorot:

It harrowed him

to hear the din of the loud banquet
every day in the hall, the harp being struck
and the clear song of a skilled poet
telling with mastery of man's beginnings.
(Heaney 2000: 9)

It is safe to assume part of Grendel just wants to destroy it because he's a demon and he hates God, and demons exist to destroy things and cause havoc. If we are thinking of Heorot as a bawn, though, or as an expression of foreign (to Grendel) ownership over his land, that moment changes. In that interpretation, Grendel is reacting to Hrothgar and his people occupying Grendel's land, and their decision to tell "with mastery" how his world came about. Grendel attacks Heorot because it is attempting to define him and his world with its own alien terminology.

There is a similar moment earlier on in the poem, when Heaney describes Hrothgar's decision to build Heorot and the process of its construction. Heaney writes "Heorot was the name he had settled on it, whose utterance was law" (Heaney 2000: 7). The Old English line is "*scop him Heort naman, se the his wordes gewæld wide haefde*," and the word Heaney translates as "law" is "*gewæld*." *Gewæld* can also be translated as "power", as in the fact that as king, Hrothgar's words caused things to happen. Perhaps Heaney is playing with the phrase that a king's word is law, but there is a definite connotation in Heaney's translation that Hrothgar's power is one that does not just direct, but also governs and *legislates*, that is, changes the rules applicable to the land. With this word choice, Heaney adds a layer onto Hrothgar that makes him not just a king, but a potential coloniser; this is further reinforced in the reader by the passage excerpted earlier, when Grendel is bothered enough by Hrothgar's presence and his construction of Heorot to attack it and attempt to occupy it himself.

Heaney's strategy seems to be to create a translation that asks the reader to be constantly aware of the relationships between Anglo-Saxon England and modern England, colonizing England and colonized Ireland, and modern well-known speaker and past anonymous listeners. However, his connection to the poem is perhaps slightly more complicated than the colonised-versus-coloniser version Heaney himself describes. Padilla argues that Heaney's usage of Irish terms within his translation is not a moment of cultural subversion, but rather, Heaney's literary appropriation of the poem as a whole (Padilla 2008: 296). In this reading of his translation, Heaney has not crept in to remind the reader of the English language's long history as a tool of oppression; Heaney has

claimed the poem as his and his culture's own, granting himself the status of a “founding patriarch” (Eagleton 1999: 16). Heaney's translation led to a great interest for this project in whether it would be possible to add an American note to the translation without descending into pastiche, and in further exploring in this translation how a translator's own cultural and historical relationships to *Beowulf* could be expressed on a linguistic level. Padilla's interpretation of Heaney's cultural subversiveness was a further argument against any tentativeness by a translator about acknowledging her own potentially problematic relationship with *Beowulf*: if the mere act of translating *Beowulf* as a non-English citizen was to appropriate the poem, then why not be as explicit about it as possible? Why not attempt to appropriate it as an American, or as a woman, or as a pacifist, and try to effectuate those acts of appropriation throughout the translation itself?

The relationship between this project and Kevin Crossley-Holland's translations of *Beowulf* are of a slightly older vintage; in fact, Crossley-Holland's Grendel is a monster who dates back to a childhood closet. In his translation of *Beowulf* aimed at children, a drastically shortened paraphrase of the story is paired with intensely physical, intensely tactile line drawings by Charles Keeping. While this project began without a conscious memory of the book, the wallop of recognition upon encountering it while researching modern translations of *Beowulf* speaks to its memorableness.

This interest is not wholly rooted in nostalgia, however; Crossley-Holland's translation is notable for the way in which he has brought the historical figure of a performing poet to the fore of his translation, and made that act of narration an explicit part of his story. The book begins with Hygelac (who in the source text is Beowulf's king) in his mead-hall, celebrating with his warriors, including his nephew, Beowulf. A wanderer, asked to sing for his supper, tells the story of “past and present and future”, and tells the assembled heroes of the menace facing Hrothgar; it is this story that prompts Beowulf to travel to Heorot and rescue Hrothgar from the menace of Grendel (Crossley-Holland 1982: 3). The wanderer identifies himself to Hygelac as Gangleri, which he accurately translates as “wanderer”; however, Gangleri as a name is one of many aliases for Odin, the Norse god of communication, writing, and storytelling. Crossley-Holland is not just making a reference to pagan mythology; he is making a reference in a situation that presumably would be unrecognisable to his stated audience. It is difficult to believe that the average eight-year-old would be familiar either with Norse mythology or with the history of the provenance of the *Beowulf* manuscript, in which the questions of how close *Beowulf*'s relationships with

Scandinavia and pagan Europe are prominent indeed. Is Crossley-Holland providing an in-joke to the type of parent who would read *Beowulf* to his or her child? Or is he providing a trail of bread crumbs, to be picked up when the child is older? Crossley-Holland's departure from the original text at this point is playful, but it also envisions a relationship with his reading audience that is much more complicated than might be expected from the average children's book.

Gangleri begins his performance as if he is the *Beowulf* poet, with the word "Listen"—which is also how Crossley-Holland translates "*hwaet*," the first word of *Beowulf*, in his translation aimed at adults (Crossley-Holland 2009: 74). It is as if Crossley-Holland has provided a prologue situating the reader in the world of the story, before allowing the narrator to step forward and begin the more familiar source text. More interestingly, at least for the questions central to this project, Crossley-Holland makes the narrator a key character in the story, with his own personality and vital presence. While Crossley-Holland's narrator is rooted within the Anglo-Saxon world of the story (or potentially even farther back, if Gangleri's name is intended to imply it is a Scandinavian god setting Beowulf out towards his destiny), and thus at least in the superficial course of the story is more of a narrating character rather than an authorial presence, it is significant that Crossley-Holland decided to create a way for the narrator to speak in a much more explicit way than the act of narration might otherwise provide.

Crossley-Holland and Heaney are two translators singled out here, but this interest in the act of narration and in the translator's role as narrator seems to be shared by many modern *Beowulf* translators. Part of this may be rooted in an interest in more creative translations across the board, but *Beowulf* itself seems to demand more of the translator than many source texts. Chickering describes the most difficult task of the *Beowulf* translator as finding "an equivalent for the dominant voice of the poem", which moves between extolling Christianity and a stoically pagan worldview, glorying in the heroics of battle while castigating Beowulf for valuing his own fame more than his people's welfare, and hurtling through narrative and extended passages devoted to philosophical reflection (Chickering 166). There are many translations of *Beowulf* that do not use these movements as spaces in which to experiment with the narration, but for the type of translator interested in exploring the space between a narrator, a text, and an audience, *Beowulf* appears to be fruitful ground indeed, and one that invites digging.

3: Theories of Translations

This chapter is an exploration of the personal process of translation: from initial research and formulation of potential strategies through to the refinement and execution of those approaches in the final translation. Because this discussion is unavoidably subjective, to couch it in a third-person narrative would be to lend choices that are explicitly personal (and, indeed, choices that this project is devoted to arguing *are* personal) an authority and universality that is both misleading and, for the purposes of the argument posited here, actually at cross-purposes. For this reason, this chapter will be written in an explicit first-person. The final translation produced for this project is one that makes the voice of a translator and author an explicit presence; because of the reasoning behind that choice, as well as many others, I feel I must do the same here.

The temporal aspect of this chapter is another departure from accepted academic style. Because the focus of this translation cluster is on the process of translation rather than the final translated production, writing solely from the perspective of hindsight, as if every choice made as a writer sprung fully-formed out of my own head, would be a drastically simplified view of what my work as a translator actually comprises.

Before I began my translation of *Beowulf*, I read extensively about both the poem and translation studies as a whole. Because my background was very much based in creative writing more than translation, I felt a grounding in translation theory would help my future work, both translating and discussion of the issues surrounding my translation, avoid going over already well-travelled ground. As a result, the actual translation of *Beowulf* began with certain preconceived notions about how a translator ‘should’ be thinking about translation and how I should engage with certain anticipated issues. This is not to say, however, that all of my research and reading became an ivory tower monolith from which I had to break free before going on my merry maverick translator way; many aspects of translation engaged with before the translating work had begun contributed to how I approached, and actually went about, my translation. Even ideas which ultimately proved unproductive affected the translating process, in that they had to be struggled against and ultimately resolved in order to articulate an adjusted theory that better reflected my experience. As such, it seems important to not stop at merely explaining my own theory of translation, presented with the benefit of experience and hindsight; in order to accurately describe my own act of translating, I must explain how I thought about translation *before* the completion

of my own translating project, as well as discuss how the experience of translating affected my own beliefs and, in many instances, changed them. This chapter is a presentation of my pre- and post-translation opinions; it is my hope that by examining fully the space between the “before” and “after” of my own translation, I can move towards an articulation of what I am actually doing when I translate, and how that is related to my own writing.

This chapter is divided into subsections dealing with specific issues central to my treatment of *Beowulf*, largely mirroring the questions asked about my translating choices in the introduction: (a) the question of what a domesticating or foreignising strategy (in other words, producing a translation that was more or less familiar, whether syntactically or culturally, to the target reader) might mean to *Beowulf* and how I as a translator would go about pursuing a particular approach; (b) where authority is located in a translation, how providing supplementary information about the source text and culture might affect that perception of authority, and whether providing background knowledge about *Beowulf* is necessary at all; and finally, (c) how transparent and explicit a translator could, or should, be about her presence in the target text. While these three areas might seem at first glance a mix of disparate elements and argument, fundamentally each deals with where information is, or should be, located in the continuum of source culture, author, text, and reader to target culture, translator, text and reader.

The first portion of each section outlines theories and theorists that influenced my thinking, and explain how I anticipated each idea applying to my own writing work. The latter subsection moves on to discuss my experience translating *Beowulf*, to what extent my intentions towards my work were changed in execution, and how these questions were resolved in my final translation.

Although this chapter is essentially presented in two parts, my aim is not to produce a set of contrasting bookends of approaches to translation, nor is it to portray the confused creative writer moving from book-based theories to practice-based reality. My intention is to describe my own act of translating as completely as possible, as a way to move towards an articulation of how that experience has shaped my final conclusions about what it is I am doing when I translate.

3.1.1: Domestication, Foreignisation, and the Exotic

Considering the immense linguistic, historical, and cultural distances between Anglo-Saxon and

modern England, Schleiermacher's encapsulation of foreignisation and domestication, that "either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him", seems a particularly apt summation of the problem in this particular case (Venuti 2004: 59). As discussed in the previous chapter, *Beowulf* is a poem removed from modern English culture in several different ways, and producing a translation of *Beowulf* inevitably raises questions about how to illustrate or conceal those differences. I anticipated that the issue of how to domesticate or foreignise *Beowulf* would be one of the most important questions of my project, and so before beginning my own translation, I paid particular attention to how previous translators had approached the issue. This section discusses the aspects of domestication and foreignisation, both positive and negative, that I anticipated would arise in the course of my translation; explains why *Beowulf* has a compelling relationship to those ideas; and discusses how I had anticipated approaching those questions in my translation.

The idea of 'domesticating' a translation can also be described as a process of assimilation; as part of the movement from source to target text, aspects of the source culture are altered in order to be more readily recognized by or accessible to the target culture's readership. This can happen in several different ways. One of the most commonly-used methods, even in texts that are not explicitly domesticating otherwise, is to use word choices and syntactic structure more commonly found in the target language. This could be as rudimentary as changing a sentence structure to a subject-verb-object construction in order to read more easily to an English-speaking audience, or assigning gender to a character when the source language would allow that to remain ambiguous. Because Old English contains many more inflectional endings than modern English, translating *Beowulf* into typically English phrasing involves rearranging sentence structures and adding pronouns and transitive verbs that were unnecessary, and not grammatically acceptable, in Old English. This type of domestication is not at all a cultural shift; it is about making the translation behave linguistically in the manner its target audience expects its own language to perform.

Another method of domestication is to alter the form of the source text as part of the translating process, translating it into a target genre or form considered appropriate for the source material. A canonical example is Alexander Pope's translation of *The Iliad* as a poem in heroic couplets; the form's association with serious and elevated subject matter is a match, at least in Pope's eyes, with the epic Greek classic. It is worth noting that even then, Pope's domestication raised the

odd dissent; Richard Bentley responded to the couplets with "It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer" (France 2001: 90). Past translations of *Beowulf* have typically taken this approach only partially; while virtually all translations stray from the source text's form in terms of meter, most remain similar visually to the source text, with lines of regular length and very long stanzas.

Continuing the motion outward from syntactic to cultural details, perhaps the most literally domesticating strategy is to alter details within the text that refer to facets of the source culture, transforming them into their (needless to say, rough) equivalents in the target text; one example is William Guthrie's 1741 translation of Cicero's Orations, which refers to Cicero as a member of Parliament (Venuti 2008: 54). In this strategy, focussing on the relationships between objects and people is considered of more importance than the details of each position: a Roman Consul is very different from a British MP, but if one's focus is on how an ordinary citizen of each culture would understand the position and importance of its respective politician, the strategy becomes somewhat more persuasive. By speaking about foreign aspects of the source text in ways that a reader will immediately understand, the reader is then able to engage with the text without the level of alienation that cultural unfamiliarity might produce. There are several moments within *Beowulf* in which decisions of this type need to be made; for example, a translator might choose to translate the relationship between Hygelac and Beowulf as that of a lord and his warrior, thereby siting their relationship within feudal language more familiar to the average modern English reader, or she might choose to retain the cultural distance and unfamiliarity by referring to Beowulf as a "*gesith*" (from the Old English) or "*comitatus*," a Latin term similar to the Old English "*thegn*" or modern English "thane." Similarly, there are repeated moments in which characters refer to fate, or "*wyrd*," controlling everything that happens; to translate the word as "fate" is to make the discussion more easily understandable (and, arguably, more secular), while to leave it as "*wyrd*" in the target text foreignises the discussion as well as potentially (depending on how familiar the reader is with Norse mythology) pointing attention to the Scandinavian setting of the poem.

The danger of utilising the "unassuming sanity" of domestication, as Clive Scott calls it (Scott 2000: 13), is that it can potentially obscure all parties involved in translation except for the target culture. Boase-Beier writes that a domesticating approach tries "not to tax the reader by unfamiliarity" (Boase-Beier 2006a: 68); by attempting to create a target text that reads easily,

without much effort of interpretation or input from the reader, not just the source culture or language is hidden, but the translator and act of translation itself. If a translator attempts to make the foreign aspects—be they linguistic or cultural—of a source text as unobtrusive as possible, the target text may end up reading as if the transcultural movement within its translation never actually existed. Take, for example, the quotation of Norman Shapiro used to open the first chapter of Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility*: "I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated . . . It should never call attention to itself" (Venuti 2008: 1). It is worth pointing out that Shapiro is, at this point, hardly a spokesman for modern views on translation, and Venuti is attacking a straw man by opening his book with Shapiro's point of view. Whether the larger reading public would, though, is less certain, and reviews such as James Shapiro's 2000 *New York Times* review of Heaney's *Beowulf*, which praised it for being "what before now had seemed impossible: a faithful rendering that is simultaneously an original and gripping poem in its own right", would suggest that a significant number of people still see source and target cultures as nearly mutually exclusive.

The obvious connected danger is that domesticating a text hides not just the translator, but the source culture itself. An emphasis on fluency and domestication, as argued extensively by Venuti, can become an expression of cultural imperialism—translation becomes a way in which a source culture can be presented to a target readership cleaned up of the aspects of its culture that make it distinctive and unfamiliar. This can come not just by the way in which translation can release a readership from having to learn languages other than its own, but in how domesticating translations can create the illusion that all cultures are fundamentally similar to our own, and reading those translations can "provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognising their own culture in a cultural other" (Venuti 2008: 12). By perpetuating the idea that every culture's literature reads exactly as our own, domestication can make us as readers believe that all people, regardless of background, think the same way we do. This is particularly dangerous with a poem like *Beowulf*, which is often viewed as an English poem: James Wood, in his 1999 *Guardian* review of Heaney's translation, refers to it as living "singly, as an English language poem." Despite being a poem typically read in translation, *Beowulf* is fairly strongly established as part of the English canon of literature. A strongly domesticated translation furthers this view of *Beowulf* as the father of modern England, when in reality the world of Anglo-Saxon England is drastically different than, and foreign to, the modern English world. It may be an English poem, but it is unequivocally *not* an England we would recognise.

Foreignisation, then, attempts the opposite movement: the target text attempts to foreignise its reading experience, often by including details of its source culture—often the same type of details mentioned previously with regard to domestication, such as syntactic or cultural aspects unique to the source culture. A target text can also foreignise itself in ways which have nothing to do with the source culture; in this approach to foreignisation (espoused by the Russian Formalist/Prague structuralist arguments), the 'foreign' aspects are ones which deviate from the comfortable norm reading experience of the target culture, and do not have to be related to the source culture at all. One approach which uses the source culture as a foreignising tool, though, is Venuti's suggestion that a translator could produce

"translating that samples the dialects, registers and styles already available in the translating language" (Venuti 2008: 341). In this approach, different modes of speech in the target language are utilised in order to create a level of distance between text and reader. Given my interest in producing a translation with exploded voices, perspectives, and meanings, I found this strategy compelling, and as will be discussed later in this section, decided early on to utilise it in my work.

Another approach particularly interesting given my own project and concerns is foreignising a translation through time: choosing archaic words or word-forms in order to emphasise the historical space between source and target cultures; Ezra Pound utilised this approach in his translation of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*. Pound not only chose words reminiscent of the poem's Anglo-Saxon roots; he also deliberately used archaic terms from slightly later periods of English literature in order to more firmly disavow a modernising translation of the Old English (Xie 1999: 206). This strategy, or at least the way in which Pound implemented it, immediately presents a few problems, which May Sinclair touched upon in her review of Pound, writing that "it belongs to a world that by the very nature of its conventions is inconceivably remote . . . a world that we can no longer reconstruct in its reality" (Homberger 1997: 183). In other words, an attempt to reconstruct the world of a source culture at a great historical remove is impossible because of our distance from it, regardless of whether one is a translator, historian, or anyone else. All a translator (or anyone else) can do is present how she conceives of the source culture—her individual interpretation of how that culture was—or present a more generalised distance from the source text and culture, rather than the impossible task of presenting how the source culture actually is. (Like many children making their first attempts at poem-writing, this was something I had to learn by doing in my earliest poems: imagine my distress when my liberal

usage of "forsooth" and "'twas" did not result in the immediate artistic authority I assumed it would confer.) Another example from a more modern poet is Simon Armitage's translation of Euripedes' play *Heracles*, which he titles *Mister Heracles*. Among other changes, Armitage plays with making the passage of time an explicit part of his translation; Armitage writes in his introduction, speaking of the notion of translation in general, that "It is probably more useful to think that the play. . . has been inferred, across time" (Armitage 2000: iv). This approach is reflected in the slipperiness of the temporal details of the play, where characters reference both atomic- and iron-age weapons. At one point, Armitage also has one character quote an earlier translation of his own speech, bringing not just the intervening years into focus, but intervening translations.

A somewhat less serious complication of attempting to translate temporally is that emphasising particular features of a source text tempts a translation to stray into pastiche, as Ballantyne wrote in a critique of an Old English translation: "poems in which thrall-folk seek to the feast-hall a-winter do not belong to any literary centre. They are provincial; they are utterly without distinction; they are unspeakably absurd" (Venuti 2008: 141). Joking aside, however, the main danger of Ballantyne's critique is a real one; when using foreignisation as a strategy a translator can run a real risk of exoticising the source culture she is attempting to translate. Focusing on the ways in which a culture is different from one's own can be as tokenising as focusing only on the ways in which source and target culture are alike. In a world in which heroes slaying dragons with swords is common cultural currency, furthermore, the danger of foreignisation is that it falls from exoticism into cliché; TimeOut's review of "The Thirteenth Warrior" as "a Python remake of *The Vikings*" is one example of a *Beowulf* translation tipping over this line (Pym 2003: 134).

More fundamentally, a potential issue with the dichotomy between domestication and foreignisation, particularly with a foreignising strategy that focuses on utilising elements from the source culture, is the fact that it creates translation strategies along a binary system; as Venuti writes, "the foreignness of the foreign text is available only in cultural forms that already circulate in the translating language" (Venuti 2008: 176). A domesticating translation erases the distinction between source and target cultures, but a foreignising translation may register the foreign elements of a source text solely in terms of its difference from the target culture. As will be discussed later in more detail, this in particular was a problem in this translation, and it was attempting to get away from this binary view of Anglo-Saxon England versus modern England

that led to my eventual strategy for translating the language of *Beowulf*.

This section so far has largely been a summary of issues I was exploring before beginning my translation, as well as questions I anticipated would apply particularly strongly to *Beowulf*. Before I move on, I would like to briefly outline what strategies I had anticipated utilising as I translated; while they were not part of any formal game plan, these ideas were developments of how I was thinking about the act of translation, and explaining how I had thought about my work in translation indicates the initial direction towards how my current ideas about translation were shaped. I anticipated that the form and meter of *Beowulf* would require me to domesticate the language to some extent, but I was not sure how much the original form should or would be altered. I knew that I wanted to produce a translation that spoke in different voices, and I was interested in particular in Venuti's ideas about using different registers in the target language to represent foreign aspects of the source text. As I began my translation, then, I anticipated using multiple dialects and registers as part of my translation, both to help foreignise my translation and to differentiate between separate voices within the target text.

3.1.2: Domestication and Foreignisation in *Beowulf*

The most obvious differences between the original text of *Beowulf* and my translation are apparent from even a cursory scan of either document: while the source text *Beowulf* consists of a single 3,182-line poem in regular lines, my translation is broken up into dozens of discrete poems which are written in a variety of forms, meters, and lengths. (As a side note, the edition of *Beowulf* used as the primary source text for my translation was the 1995 edition of Michael Alexander's glossed text.) While part of the decision-making in this instance is rooted in my approach to a translatorial presence (and will be discussed again later on in this chapter), the initial impetus behind my decision was a choice in favour of domestication rather than alienation in the larger structure of the translation. As explained in the previous chapter, Anglo-Saxon poetry is drastically different from any modern English poetic form. It is broken up into shorter lines, which traditionally has been a signifier of poetry (Brogan 1994: 233), but in other respects such as meter and alliterative patterns, *Beowulf* is so foreign to a modern English reader that many details might not even be registered as features of its poetic form. In addition, the differences between Old English and modern English would make fully replicating Anglo-Saxon poetry in modern English extremely difficult, if not outright impossible. Because of these

immediate obstacles, I embarked on my translation already comfortable with the notion of translating *Beowulf* into modern English poetic forms. While this movement is undoubtedly a domesticating move on its own, my motives were rooted in a desire to create a translation which modern readers would encounter as poetry. My concern was that a modern reader presented with a poem drastically different from what she was used to encountering would become so alienated from the translation that the details of the poem would be lost in a larger wave of other-ness—in other words, that the entire translation would be so foreign that a reader would stop engaging with the text, and merely accept any unknown element as yet another example of Anglo-Saxon England's distance from our own culture. I hoped to use a high-level strategy of domestication in order to more successfully, and more directly, alienate the reader from smaller details of the text. To put this in more concrete terms, if a warrior says "Disease or oldness or sword-hate/ Beats out the breath from doom-gripped body," as he does in Pound's translation (Xie 1999: 219), there are several layers of foreignisation to work through: the speaker is not just articulating moral and religious views that have become quite foreign to us, but he is saying it in a syntax which requires its own navigation and interpretation. In my translation, when Hrothgar says "It happens: the foundations of the body fall, the house crumbles. We die", it contains a similar summation of Anglo-Saxon fatalism, but is presented in a modern, colloquial syntax. In this case, the reader can process the wording of Hrothgar's speech without much difficulty; it is the content of what he is saying which requires engagement and analysis.

The obvious question at this point is whether my decision to effectively prioritise message (plot) over medium (form) is an appropriate choice; my response is that for my translation, with my specific interests and aims, it was. One of my preoccupations while translating *Beowulf* was the multiplicity of voices contained in it as a source text: in the contemporary surroundings of the poem, in the poem's composition, and in the characters of the poem itself. The narrator of *Beowulf* is at times critical of, questioning of, and sarcastic about the actions of the main characters, and a major priority of mine was to produce a translation that focused on those conflicting multiplicities and encouraged readers to question their own experience of the story as the narrator questioned his. If translation is viewed as a type of constraint the writer chooses to place upon herself, then it can also be argued that to attempt to retain the source form as well would be too stifling a combination; indeed, while the link between a free translation in general and a translation free specifically about the form of the poem is manifest, it is notable that virtually all more experimental translations of *Beowulf* from the last century diverge from the

source text in form. Finally, and perhaps most damningly, Howell Chickering has dismissed translations which reproduce Old English poetic meter as “honourable failures,” writing that “Modern English poetry simply cannot match the clangorous magnificence of the Old English” (Chickering 2002: 162). In order to emphasise a heightened level of engagement with the text, as well as to open up more experimental avenues of translation, I chose to de-emphasise a formal layer which I felt would be at best a distraction, at worst a crippling obstacle to successful poetry.

This is not to say, however, that this translation of *Beowulf* dispensed entirely with any superficially foreign elements. While I was interested in producing a modern English poetic version of *Beowulf*, my intention was not to update the world of the poem completely, merely to translate the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England into a poetic form easily recognisable to a modern English-speaking audience. Translating *Beowulf* into stanzas of loose terza rima heightened the alienating effect of foreign person- and place-names: to find the word ‘*Hronesnaesse*’ in an unfamiliar, percussive poetic line is less of a jar upon the reader than to find it in a line of free verse; that increased difference between description and descriptor draws the reader’s attention not just to the foreign aspect of the name, but to the intervening history between her world and the poem’s. (Interestingly, Crossley-Holland’s translation takes an alternate approach: while his translation utilises lines of generally even length and stresses, he translates “*Hronesnaesse*” to its literal English translation, “Whaleness,” which while more familiar in the sense of being made up of English words, is morphologically deviant and thus arguably a *more* foreignising approach (Crossley-Holland 2009: 144).)

While I translated *Beowulf* into more modern poetic forms and line structures, I chose to retain other micro-level aspects of Old English poetry. While the alliteration in my translation is not as regular or as regimented as it was in the source text, it is a regular feature of the translation, and is an iteration of this feature of Old English poetry that, used more intermittently, reminds the reader of the foreignness of *Beowulf* without becoming alienating. Another feature of Old English poetry I chose to retain is the use of kennings; while modern English writers generally don’t use kennings, the metaphoric movement contained within a kenning’s compound nouns is familiar to a reader of modern English poetry. Despite modern English not allowing syntactically for most compounding, “certain compound types . . . occur frequently in poems”, and thus it can safely be assumed that a modern English reader would interpret kennings as the same sort of metaphor (Boase-Beier 1987: 2). As with alliteration, this was an aspect of the source text that I felt could

be utilised in my translation without complicating the reading experience I was attempting to provide.

So far the bulk of this discussion has focused on aspects of my translation which stayed largely in keeping with my intentions before I began translating. My original plan to use different registers and colloquialisms, however, changed completely from my initial efforts to my final translation. One motivating factor in my decision to use a multiplicity of poetic forms was to bring in a sense of temporal movement between the source and target texts. This style of translation is one singled out by Maria Tymoczko as one deprioritised by Western translators; she uses the Hindi term for translation, ‘*anuvad*’ (‘following’) as an example of a metaphor for translation that has been previously ignored or criticised by traditional Western thinking about translation (Tymoczko 2007: 68-77). To translate a portion of *Beowulf* into terza rima is to take a tenth-century text, apply to it a fourteenth-century form of poetry, and produce a twenty-first-century translation. When I began translating, I planned to deliberately use modern colloquialisms in order to similarly draw attention to the historical remove between *Beowulf*’s time and ours. Armitage’s translation *Mister Heracles* used a similar strategy, albeit with an additional layer of using idiolect and register to demarcate groups of characters from one another. Armitage translates the central family as unable to speak outside of blank verse, while the chorus and other characters are much freer in their means of expression (Armitage 2000). This use of register allows Armitage to delineate groups of characters, but there is an additional meaning linked to the historical connotations of free and blank verse: the family’s use of an older poetic form links them to a similarly older worldview that has trapped and will eventually destroy them.

Early drafts attempted to play with modern colloquialisms; an early version of Grendel’s first attack upon Heorot had him sucking out a warrior’s bone marrow “like a strawberry milkshake”. Unfortunately, the moments which brought in modern references were uniformly jarring, unpersuasive, and fundamentally did not work; rather than emphasising the flow of time between source and target text, they served to highlight either end of the temporal bookends, making both seem faintly ridiculous. A review of Anne Carson’s translation *An Oresteia* singled out her use of modern colloquialisms as a negative (it appears Greek drama is particularly irresistible to the modernising translator), writing that “Blood and revenge and the killings of kings and queens were all present and correct, but the words weren’t. . . [H]er penchant for colloquialisms and modern-day idioms proved a great distraction” (The *Guardian* 2009). My early drafts had similar

problems. Beowulf wielding a broadsword in iambic pentameter was believable; Beowulf wielding a broadsword while referencing spaghetti westerns in iambic pentameter was not. I went through my translation and removed any consciously modern cultural references, and found the new draft read much more successfully. This is not to say that no modern touchstones have made it into my finished translation, however; one of the first lines in my translation is “Stop me/ if you’ve heard this one before”—a vaguely vaudevillian phrase, and a departure from the source text. My original intention, when I used that line, was to attempt to capture some of the nuances of the word “*hwaet*,” which opens the poem. “*Hwaet*” is an extremely complicated word, encapsulating the ideas “here the story starts” and “sit down and listen”—it is the equivalent of “once upon a time” without the fairy-tale connotations, and is quite difficult to translate into modern English. Seamus Heaney translated it as “So,” and spent a portion of the introduction to his translation explaining how members of his family habitually began anecdotes with the word “so” (Heaney 2000: xxvii); for Heaney, his translation was a movement of a ritual word from Anglo-Saxon culture into his own. My family is not in the habit of beginning stories with the phrase “stop me if you’ve heard this one,” but it was a phrase I (like most modern English-speakers) had heard before, and a phrase in particular that was bouncing around the cultural zeitgeist when I deployed it in my own translation. Mark Ronson’s 2007 album *Version* included a single, called “Stop Me,” in which the chorus repeated the phrase “stop me if you think that you’ve heard this one before.” More interestingly for my project, the song was a cover of the 1987 song “Stop Me If You Think You’ve Heard This One Before” by The Smiths, with the interpolation of selected lyrics from a 1966 single by The Supremes. In other words, I borrowed lyrics from a modern song, which had borrowed its own material from two different songs separated by several decades, one of which contained its own references to past cultural touchstones (the video for The Smiths’s song includes exterior shots of the Salford Lads Club, also used on the cover of their album *The Queen is Dead*, which has become an iconic image both of nineteenth-century philanthropy and 1980s British pop music). Depending on the reader, then, the phrase references any number of moments in history, creating a “tissue of quotations” that includes the *Beowulf* text as well as texts taken from intervening centuries (Barthes 1977: 146). This temporal slipperiness (or shiftiness) of the reference is, I believe, why it works in my translation: rather than calling attention to individual moments of time, it emphasises movement *through* time.

This successful use of a more modern reference ended up informing the rest of my translation and

my strategy towards modern forms and language throughout. My overall approach was to create poetic language and form that was largely neutral: throughout the translation I attempted to use, as much as possible, phrases and poetic forms that were not strongly tied to any particular time period. For example, the attack upon Heorot by Grendel's mother is written in terza rima; while the form is most associated with Dante, it has been used in English since Chaucer, and particularly when the rhyme pattern is paired with a loose meter, terza rima as a form is not linked closely enough to Dante to come across as particularly medieval or particularly Italian. I chose not to translate any portion of *Beowulf* into sonnet form, particularly Shakespearean, both because that form is relatively enclosed (thus making it more difficult to integrate into a series of poems) and because a Shakespearean sonnet carries with it obvious and integral ties to a specific time and place; if terza rima was known as 'Dante triplets,' perhaps I would have felt similarly about that form (Brogan 1994: 276). In the final translation, place- and time-specific references are almost always to the world of *Beowulf*; my aim was to create the sense of a story that was being told through time and was aware of that movement (as will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter), but was fundamentally focused on its Anglo-Saxon origins.

The other main problem in the translating process was how to approach translating a system of cultural beliefs I found problematic. The world of *Beowulf* is a world in which women are treated as chattels, a man's worth is determined by his capacity for violence, and religious beliefs are rooted in a Christian God while still leaning heavily towards the notion that "wyrd," or fate, determines everything. (For a more thorough discussion of the tension between Christian and pagan worldviews in *Beowulf*, see Kasik 1979.) All of these ideas are at best merely unfamiliar, at worst offensive; I wanted them to appear in my translation, but was concerned about how to translate historical realities and beliefs that I personally found distasteful. My original plan was to provide commentary on the poem; one early draft included marginalia, both in an overall narrative voice and in the voices of characters from the poem, giving contrasting views of events. This brought up the same difficulty as my original idea of a central narrator: by casting one voice in the role of commenter, I cast that viewpoint as a fundamentally reactive argument. There were moments in my translation which I was happy to translate as reacting explicitly to the source text; for example, when Grendel's mother carries out her revenge against the men sleeping in Heorot, the source text repeatedly uses male pronouns to refer to her (Nitzsche 1980). Critical scholarship has singled out this scene as a moment in which the patriarchal aspects of Anglo-Saxon society are particularly emphasised; Paul Acker identifies it as the "pivotal moment . . . [in which]

Grendel's mother threatens not just an individual man's dominance but the whole system of male dominance" (Acker 2006: 708). To simply change the pronouns to female seemed inappropriate for many reasons, but particularly because of my interest in engaging with the problematic moments between translator and text. The finished translation calls attention to the fact that the warriors referred to Grendel's mother as 'he'; it situates viewing Grendel's mother as male in the Anglo-Saxon portion of the poem without obfuscating or explaining, choosing instead to allow the reader to draw her own conclusion.

To use commentary of this kind for large swathes of the translation, however, created a dual, and duelling, series of voices. Furthermore, by contrasting the old established translation with a new interrogative commentary, my translation ran the danger of creating a translation in which old and foreign equalled bad, and modern and English equalled good: a translation which viewed itself as improving on, and superseding, its source text. And finally, a commentary which seemed to be written from a modern viewpoint implied that the main text of the translation was from an Anglo-Saxon viewpoint, and thus somehow an "honest" portrayal of Anglo-Saxon culture—when, of course, it was just as much my view of what the world of *Beowulf* was like as the rest of the poem.

My solution was to extend my approach towards narrative voice into how I treated more formal aspects of the translation. Instead of producing a translation with a potentially hierarchical structure of voices, I redrafted my translation to incorporate all of those perspectives into the main narrative. Critical approaches to *Beowulf* have often focussed on its narrative voice as a locus of power, particularly with regard to gender roles depicted in the text. Clare Lees has argued that translations of the poem which treat its world of male dominance as self-evident "naturalizes gender and thereby promotes masculinism" (Lees 1994: 146). To continue to translate the narrative as an unquestionably masculine and patriarchal one can, as Mary Catherine Davidson argues, suggest that modern society as a patriarchy is similarly certain (Davidson 2005). To bring a plurality of voices into the central narrative, then, avoids a structure of existing structure (narrative) versus dissenting rebel (commentary), but instead suggests that a variety of worldviews and experiences are possible.

Some of this translation includes writing that is much more my own voice and opinion; an example of this is in the story of Hildeburh. This is a digression from the central narrative of

Beowulf, told at one of Hrothgar's celebratory feasts; a poet tells the story of a woman married to her family's enemy, who eventually loses her brother, her son, and her husband to their conflict, and ends the story carried from her marital home back to her family. In the source text, the story is told from a third-person perspective and focuses on the conflicts between the warriors; Hildeburh's conflicted loyalties are only briefly mentioned. My initial plan had been to tell one version of the story, but to tell it in Hildeburh's voice, which the source text does not; this early draft focussed on Hildeburh's losses and the ways in which her duelling familial and marital ties left her in an untenable social position. This approach merely substituted one viewpoint for another; Hildeburh gained a voice, but the warriors forced to spend the winter in the hall of their conqueror were lost, and that tension between political strategy and personal honour was something I felt was worth preserving in my translation. In the final draft, excerpted below, I provided two simultaneous narratives: one by Hildeburh, and one by an unnamed soldier in her family's retinue.

Hildeburh

We were armies without arms.
Finn was too weak to drive us out
or fight Hengest to the finish, and we
were tired, provisionless—we had to stay.

He swallowed the truce we tossed him:
Finn would empty us a hall, a throne
for Hengest to sit on, and Danes and Jutes
would own it and any treasure together.

Finn swore to it; Hengest made him.
He said those of us who survived
earned his respect, and none of his men
would be oath-breakers in word or deed,

or so much as complain. We smirked
to see Hengest settle into that second throne,
I can tell you. Then we buried our dead,
our old leader, her brother, among them.

Her whelp went on the fire as well,
she insisted on it. Flames lit the blood
staining their shirts, broken bodies bursting.
Fate does as it must. The fire took them.

We sat there, that slaughter-stained winter,
locked in sea-ice that wouldn't lift,
and those bastards sulking at our heels,
stinking faces I saw from under a shield.

Spring: but we exiles thought less of escape
than of vengeance, and when Hunlafing
brought battle-flame to Hengest, that warrior
took it up, and Finn fell in his own home.

The hall ran red, and our score lay silent
and settled. We looted Finn's house
and sailed with his woman back to Denmark.
We brought her back to her people.

*They waited to burn our dead
until we were back in Denmark.
I sat in the boat, till they came for me
with welcoming garlands. My hair*

*smells of smoke. That long winter
and the smell of pine on the fire—
my husband smiling at me, my smile
and its stupidity, the mead-carrying fool,*

*my son in the flames. A handshake
sealed in blood, and I believed it:
surely this stalemate must bring peace?
Surely your word must be your bond?*

*Their new leader, on my brother's throne
in my husband's house, I am a spider
in a web of spun gold. I didn't gather wood
for the pyre; it would have been unseemly.*

*The light on their faces, hissing sounds
as blood leaked out into steam.
Heaven take them, watch over them both,
I was surrounded by snakes.*

*Needles through thread, pricked fingers
passing ale from throat to throat.
I was born to this. A bright smile,
weaving peace with barbing threads*

*that snap and slice. I saw their faces turn
and could do nothing. My hands fell empty
as they fought and fell, my eyes
in my murdered husband's face.*

*This house is gone. My hall stands silent,
this prow lashes me back to my home.
I am entombed in ice, I am frost-locked,
and what blood can open these bonds?*

These concurrent narratives, written in stanzas of equal form and length, was meant to portray divergent viewpoints existing simultaneously. Rather than prioritising one time period over another, it provided different views of the same events and invited the reader to construct her own narrative out of the mixture.

This approach is supported by certain narrative strategies in the source text. One of the things lost in many translations of *Beowulf* is the occasional ambivalence towards Beowulf on the part of the

narrator. He sees Beowulf as a hero, but there are points at which he intimates disapproval of Beowulf's actions and invites the reader to sympathise. At the end of the poem, when Beowulf as an ageing king decides to battle the dragon alone, the narrator sounds doubtful of his decision; Heaney translates this moment as Beowulf being "too proud" to fight at the head of an army (Heaney 2000: 159), while Crossley-Holland describes Beowulf as "disdain[ing]" the same thing (Crossley-Holland 2009: 133). Further events bear the narrator's opinion out: Beowulf dies fighting the dragon, and the poem ends with his people left defenceless to be conquered and killed. The closing lines of the poem are a list of Beowulf's positive qualities as a king, but end on describing Beowulf as "most eager for fame," implying that Beowulf's decisions as a king were rooted more in his ego than in his desire to do the best for his people. The narrator, in other words, is telling two stories at once: Beowulf as conquering hero, and Beowulf as egotist who left his people to starve. In this translation, I include several instances of the narrator providing whispered or parenthetical commentary; one example is just before Beowulf dives into the lake where Grendel's mother lives in order to avenge Aeschere's death. Beowulf makes a lengthy speech about what to do with his goods if he is killed in battle, then jumps into the lake; I add a parenthetical aside by the narrator that there was "no pause for an answer/ or wait for applause, though I know he expected it". When I read Beowulf's speech, it felt like showboating, and so I chose to highlight that potential reading of it in the final translation. I also included in my translation poems from the viewpoints of other characters who would not necessarily see the story in the same way. This is, again, supported by critical readings of the text; *Beowulf* "explicitly presents human choice in an unusually wide range of spheres", and a translation that presented equally as explicitly a wide range of voices seemed appropriate (Galloway 1990: 197). By spreading moral judgements, both good and bad, throughout a collection of voices, I aimed to be able to produce a translation of a poem I often disagree with that prioritised my own view as little as possible. I acknowledge that in many ways, this objective is just as pedantic a narrative strategy as any other: to prioritise the idea that many different views of *Beowulf* are possible is still emphasising my own opinion; Hermans' query about "whose voice comes to us when we read translated discourse?" (Hermans 1996: 26) still receives the same reply, even if my version of an answer comes in many different voices. I hoped, though, that by producing a multi-voiced translation which also drew attention to my own role as a translator, a reader would realise my role in the creation of every voice in the poem, and be encouraged to therefore view all of them as examples of subjective viewpoints of the story.

3.2.1: Background Knowledge and Authority

In order to most productively engage with issues surrounding *Beowulf*, I have provided quite a bit of background about *Beowulf*'s composition, the literary techniques involved in its production, and the translations that have preceded my own; the second chapter of this thesis demonstrates how *Beowulf* raises certain issues connected to my own interests as a writer. Exploring certain formal aspects and historical background of the poem allows me to explain choices that lead to productive discussions in a critical context, but would not necessarily contribute to a reader's understanding of this translation. If this was merely a translation of *Beowulf*, rather than one that was part of a dissertation about translation theory and practice, though, how much (if any) of that information would it be necessary to provide to the reader? A major concern of this translation, both as a final product and as a process of translation, was determining what a reader needed to know, and whether feeling secure or insecure about the background of *Beowulf* affected a reader's experience of the translation.

One strategy towards a translation which potentially requires background knowledge is simply to provide the translation with no information other than that which is contained in the text. This approach can be appealing because it seems to have a certain amount of respect for the source text as a creative expression: we regularly read novels about cities we've never visited or people eating food we don't recognise; why should a text having originated in another language require copious explanation? This strategy also seems to respect the *reader*; if a translator assumes that a reader is incapable of interpreting the text for him- or herself, or assumes that she cannot present the unfamiliar without explanation, she most probably gets the reader she deserves (Scott 2000: 15).

When I first began this translation, I was concerned about how a lack of background knowledge might affect a potential reader: given that a major focus of the translation was to be explicit about my own engagement with the text, I worried that to not ensure that engagement was completely clear would be to weaken this final translation. An example of this type of engagement with the source text is Ezra Pound's translation of "The Seafarer." While initially, I viewed this poem as an argument for providing more background knowledge as part of my translation, it eventually became an example of why I did *not* include more explicit explanations of my connection with the source text.

“The Seafarer” is a lament written in the voice of a loyal warrior who has outlived his lord and is now travelling a lonely and icy sea alone. After approximately one hundred lines of this unnamed warrior mourning the loss of his home, cohort and security, and longing for his own death, the final (much briefer) portion of the poem announces that forgiveness and happiness can be found in the Lord. It's quite jarring, and seems to negate the entire emotional tone of the preceding hundred lines; some scholars have argued that the Christian coda was a deliberate addition by an English Christian author “actively working to introduce Christian elements into [his] native poetic tradition” (Campbell 1960: 88). Pound's translation leaves the final portion of the poem out entirely. That change would undoubtedly be more appreciated by readers who were already aware of the source text (Venuti 2008: 32). If a reader is not aware the source text ends with a Christian moral, then the fact that the target text does *not* loses all significance; Pound's translation is merely a translation of an Anglo-Saxon lament, rather than a modern writer's reaction to what he saw as the Christianised white-washing of a pagan poet.

When I began this translation, I saw Pound's translation as an example of how not providing readers with background knowledge could harm their experience of a translation: by not providing an explanation for his omission, Pound had created a poem dependent on knowledge of its source text for its meaning. As I continued my own translation, paying attention to how my own reaction to *Beowulf* affected my translating choices, though, my view of Pound's “Seafarer” began to look more and more like a reflection of my own viewpoint and interests as a translator. Plenty of other forms of literature reference preceding works in ways that affect their interpretation, but I had never argued that James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a faint shadow of the Greek epic that inspired it, or that a reader must be firmly grounded in *Jane Eyre* before attempting *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. The difference between my reaction to *Ulysses* and my reaction to “The Seafarer” was not based in some nuance of my views on translation, but on my own emerging relationship with Anglo-Saxon poetry; I wanted Pound to point out that he was transforming a Christian poem into an Anglo-Saxon lament because I was struggling with how to point out that I was a woman translating a completely male-centric poem, and a secular translator retelling a Christian epic, and a person with fairly pacifist views translating a poem which celebrates a warrior culture. My changing understanding of Pound's poem and the decisions behind it illustrated not how I should approach including background knowledge in my translation, but instead how I needed to interrogate my own impulses about providing background knowledge,

and to determine whether those impulses were part of an overall approach to my translation, or were coming out of my own grapplings with the source text.

Another issue tied to calling attention to background knowledge is the way in which giving precedence to that knowledge ascribes weight to it—weight that potentially begins to overwhelm the target text itself. If a text is presented with explanatory notes or marginalia, that can imply that the text is somehow not robust enough to stand on its own, that it must be situated in a larger historical or literary discussion in order to enhance significance. Furthermore, providing an explanation about a text can move focus from the text to the explanation itself, as anyone who has found their eyes being pulled inexorably to a gloss along the side of a manuscript can tell you. If a translator tells the reader via a marginal note or footnote in her translation of *Beowulf* that a portion of the manuscript is burned, then the reader's focus moves from the story within the text to the fact of its burning; that unavoidably brings in not just an awareness of the translator's presence, but lends that presence an air of direction and authority that may be unwelcome (Scott 2000: 25).

One potential problem of allowing a target text to stand without any extraneous information, though, is that while providing explanation may create a greater hierarchy of knowledge between translator and reader, *not* to do so runs the risk of creating the perception (if not the reality) of an educated elite within the readership of that text. Pound's translation of "The Seafarer" differs from the original poem in that it omits a portion of it, and so a reader unaware of Pound's omission will also be unaware of other readers who are conscious of that decision by Pound: he will not know that he does not know something, and he will not know that others *do*. Sometimes, though, the decision rests on moments of reference that cannot be smoothed over; a useful example can be found in *Beowulf*. At one point, the narrator is describing the wife of Beowulf's lord, Hygelac, and in line 1932 compares her to another queen, named either Modthryth or Thryth; within the world of the poem, Modthryth is a past queen who was known for being sadistically cruel to the men surrounding her before a successful marriage turned her into a compassionate and popular woman. The sudden shift to speaking of a queen unrelated to the action of the poem might imply that Modthryth was a figure of folk legend who *Beowulf's* audience could be assumed to recognise, much like a modern English-speaking writer might compare a female character to Snow White's stepmother. Another hypothesis is that her name is a deliberate echo of the name of a queen contemporary to *Beowulf's* composition; Modthryth's

husband is named Offa, and there was a Mercian king in the 8th century also named Offa; some critics who support an earlier date for *Beowulf*'s composition argue that the Modthryth digression indicates that the *Beowulf* poet is making a political reference to a contemporary (Olsen 1997: 321). Meanwhile, other recent criticism has argued that "Mod Thryth" was a descriptor rather than a name, and the evil queen was in actuality named Fremu, which has been otherwise read as an adjective (Leneghan 2009). I present these theories to illustrate the wide range of critical opinion surrounding Modthryth, and to emphasise that there is no clear answer as to the name's background. Whatever the truth of the matter may be, in actuality the reference to Modthryth in *Beowulf* is the only knowledge we have of her; barring the discovery of new and relevant material, the different arguments over who and what she was will never be completely resolved. A reader unversed in Anglo-Saxon history and Old English criticism, however, is not going to know that: he will read a reference to what may be a historical figure and, perhaps, assume that he is missing an allusion that other readers more familiar with the Old English corpus will recognise. Scott has argued that the simple fact of producing a translation creates an assumption that the translation and source text are both coherent, complete texts (Scott 2006: 156), and providing the translation without commentary or explanatory information is to encourage that illusion which, in this particular instance, is patently untrue. In this case, what I wanted to do was to identify that uncertainty *as an uncertainty*, to "[identify] ignorance without removing it" (Scott 2000: 49), and in order to do that successfully I would *have* to provide background knowledge in some form.

If I as a translator decide, then, that some amount of background knowledge—what Pound referred to as "accompaniment"—is the more productive choice, the question then becomes how to present this knowledge. One option is to provide information in the form of footnotes or endnotes, where portions of the text can be glossed, explained, or otherwise discussed as individual moments. At the extreme of this approach is Nabokov's handling of his translation of *Onegin*, in which the explicative footnotes outnumber the pages of the actual translation (Nabokov 1992). Another similar strategy is to provide explanatory notes in the form of a preface, afterword, or appendix; in this approach the translation is glossed as a whole. This is a common approach to *Beowulf*; for example, Heaney and Crossley-Holland each provide introductions outlining the historical background of the poem; as previously stated, though, problems with using marginalia and footnotes from a narrative standpoint led me to avoid this approach in my own translation. That said, this translation is currently being edited for

publication by Penned in the Margins, and it is likely it will include an introduction, although that introductory material will be about the translation itself rather than the history of the source text; the planned introduction—and for that matter, the fact that as part of this project the translation itself is wholly embedded in a larger critical work—somewhat belies my own argument.

One alternative is Scott's suggestion that a translation can be "accompanied by graphic and diacritical information which guide reading without interfering with it" (Scott 2000: 29). When beginning this translation, I found this idea potentially productive: to create some form of marginalia or informal commentary that would speak to the main body of the text without becoming an authoritative voice to supersede or direct it. The immediate problem, then, is how a translator can guide a reading *without explicitly interfering with it*; the two ideas seem to be inextricably linked.

One option is to attempt to point attention towards the textual ambiguity itself: this approach presents an ambiguity while explicitly acknowledging it as an ambiguity. While within modern poetry, the use of ambiguity is acknowledged as an established literary technique (Empson 1930, Pilkington 2000: 69), the use of ambiguity in translation is in direct opposition to a long history of evaluating translations by how unified a direction each seemed to present. Early critics of translation even regarded ambiguity in the source text as a fault on the part of the original author, and regarded any ambiguity as a problem that a successful translator must resolve (Robinson 1997). While this is ancient history in terms of translation theory, I mention it because this approach was the dominant approach among translators during the period that *Beowulf* first began being translated into English, and is probably responsible for translations which gloss over or provide resolutions for its many ambiguous, missing, or otherwise confusing textual moments. A significant portion of *Beowulf*'s history as a translation has approached its ambiguities as questions to be answered. This approach views ambiguity as a fault in the translator or source author that must be dispensed with in a successful translation. In examples such as the reference in *Beowulf* to Modthryth, though, there is no way of resolving that ambiguity without effectively misleading the reader. Moreover, any non-translated text which provided only one interpretation would be considered didactic propaganda and of little literary value; the entire interpretation and study of literature is predicated on the idea that a text opens up choices to the reader.

Scott's work translating Baudelaire and Rimbaud has focused on the idea that translation should not just explain available choices, it should acknowledge that *any* choice, because it limits the final text, is the wrong one (Scott 2000: 15). In Scott's approach, the aim of the translator is to create a proliferation, rather than recovery, of meaning from the source text; translation becomes an "interrogative art" that, rather than hiding what it does not know, passes those areas of darkness on, acknowledging them without solving them (Scott 2000: 196, Scott 2006: 187). To apply this strategy to this translation, then, would mean finding a way to acknowledge *Beowulf's* dark areas that informed the reader of the unknown aspects of the poem without tipping a translatorial hand towards a resolution.

3.2.2: Authority in *Beowulf*

As just outlined, the questions about background knowledge and authority within the final translation centred around two seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum: how much information about the source text and culture of *Beowulf* did I want to include in my translation? And how much did I want to highlight gaps in our knowledge or understanding of *Beowulf's* source text and culture in my translation? Obviously I feel some background information is helpful in understanding my project; the inclusion of Chapter 2 in this thesis is indicative of my opinion. A larger question than what I wanted to include in my translation, though, is why I wanted to include it, and it was by answering that question for myself that I began to formulate how to approach my translation. One of the things that drew me to *Beowulf* as a piece of literature is the sheer level of ambiguity of the poem. It is a canonical piece of literature that has come out of a culture, a composition process, and a group of composers which we only partially understand; I experience *Beowulf* as a single voice coming out of thousands of whispers which we cannot quite hear. I wanted my translation to, in effect, be an experiment about trying to add those voices back into the poem; therefore, the information I wanted most to include in my translation was information that would help a reader understand that those voices actually existed, and information that would let a reader know we cannot truly know what those voices are and that my developments of them are hypothetical rather than fact.

The initial plan was to have a central narrative upon which marginalia and footnotes would develop; I began my translation intending to produce a translation that would primarily use secondary areas of text in order to provide useful information. As already written about, though,

that idea failed in the execution—even if it was provided in the form of another poem rather than as a biographical interjection, an explanation of a reference to King Offa that attempted to inform the reader of a King Offa contemporary to the *Beowulf* poet as well as a legendary King Offa who may have been a more familiar figure to an Anglo-Saxon audience inevitably came across as telling the reader there were pieces of information she needed to know in order to understand the poem. Another attempted approach was to deliberately play with poetic register in order to emphasise information. For example, early on in the poem, there is a short passage explaining Beowulf’s lineage, which includes a brief digression about another king. It names his children, but beyond that provides no further information. I wanted my translation to acknowledge both the knowledge the source text provided and the lack of information about the rest of his children’s lives, and attempted to do so by translating the passage as deliberately business- and encyclopedia-like:

BEOWULF

Leader of Scyldings

Son of Scyld Scefing, father to Heorogar, Hrothgar, Halga, and unknown daughter

b. Unknown; d. Unknown

Beowulf, Scyld's son, is not our primary focus here:
 a secondary Beowulf, though a beloved king,
 remembered long by his people, until his replacements appeared:
 a triumvirate of sons, a trio of Scyldings,
 Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga, a letter of the day of princelings.
 There was a daughter, too, that good Onela bedded—
 but she is gone, now, we shall not know her name again.

Perhaps in a translation which focused more explicitly on register changes, this would have been successful. Since my approach to the language of *Beowulf* had moved towards using an “out of time” lexicon for everything except Anglo-Saxon-specific references, though, my translation was both jarring and overwhelmingly didactic; rather than working as a gentle parody of an academic approach to the poem, on second reading it seemed to come across as entirely serious. The next draft, and the version which survived to the final translation, went in an entirely different direction:

The crown passes: from Scyld to Beow, famous among men;
 and to his son Healfdane, who ruled as long as he lived,
 grey-haired and fierce under the Scylding's shield.
 He woke four children to the word: Heorogar,
 Hrothgar, and Halga the good; Yrse, the last,

sent off early to Onela, to brighten that foreigner's bed.

*The lineage runs like knows of a spine, like the swollen knuckles
of an aged woman by the fire, pointing: here is the story beginning.
Here are the words you want.*

This approach, which eventually informed the rest of the translation, is much more consistent with the larger poem's register and overall language. The first stanza also reads much less like a Who's Who entry and more like a more aggressively poetic section of a domestic history book; I discovered that by treating the list of kings a little like an Anglo-Saxon child in a schoolroom running through past monarchs, I achieved the desired effect. The reader is given the information about the lineage that I wanted to explain; there is a sense that there is more to it, but the metaphorical diction ("He woke four children to the world") points to the surrounding, and missing, information without placing overt emphasis on it.

The italicised stanza is an elaboration from the source text (as are many of the italicised portions of my translation) that pulls the focus from the imparting of information back to awareness that the reader is being told a story. By drawing back from the information just given, as well as by introducing the image of an old woman, it adds to the overall effect of many people telling the story of *Beowulf*, each picking up odd threads of narrative as they appear and disappear.

While the decision to break up this translation of *Beowulf* into multiple discrete poems was initially based more in a desire to make the poem more accessible on a formal level, its final form evolved out of my thoughts on where to locate authority in the translation. Before I began writing, an initial idea was to structure the translation in a somewhat operatic style: a central narrator with a regular style would move the plot forward, with stand-alone poems presented at moments of action or character development, functioning similarly to arias in relation to the overall scheme of the opera. As I worked further and further into the translation, though, I realised that by having a central narrator, I had created a character who would be perceived as the locus of authority in the translation: other characters might step out and explain their inner feelings, or exciting plot points might be portrayed as individual set-pieces, but after each digression there was a return to a main voice telling a main story that, because of its centrality, was becoming imbued with the 'truth'. Rather than functioning as a continuous thread that would unify the translation as planned, the narrative voice had become something much more authoritative, and one that was placed above other voices in the hierarchy of the poem. A far more

productive approach found by examining the source narrator himself. The narrator of the source text is uniformly truthful. He does not make anything up; his approach to shaping the narrative is rooted in “selecting and emphasizing certain incidents” (de Looze 1984: 145). To make all the voices in the translation equally valuable, they must be seen as equally truthful, and to accomplish that required giving each voice an equal narrative weight. In further drafts I decided to turn the entire translation into individual poems; some were much more independent of the larger story than others, but the overall narrative was splintered into multiple sections rather than a selection of poems branching off from a central plot. By de-centralising the narrator as a character and providing many different characters who pushed the narrative along, the unnamed narrative figure, despite recurring throughout the translation, was reduced from the authoritative voice of the poem back to one character and viewpoint among many.

I knew beginning this translation that when there were moments of textual ambiguity, I wanted to attempt to portray that lack of knowledge. This particular problem was partially solved by the proliferation of narrators; when there is one central narrator, particularly in an epic poem of this kind, the assumption is that the narrator will be omniscient. If, on the other hand, there are many different characters speaking, all with individual points of view, the idea of hidden or missing information becomes an assumed part of the story. I chose to call further attention to those moments by using recurring images and phrases about how much we know, and to what extent we are able (or choose) to pass our knowledge on. There are repeated phrases throughout the translation about the speaker not knowing a piece of information or refusing to impart it; a continuing preoccupation of many of the narrators is how their passing-on of knowledge is a choice they can or cannot consciously make. For example, after Beowulf has killed Grendel, he and his men ride out to follow Grendel’s tracks into the wilderness; on the way home a poet tells a story involving a reference to an evil lord, contrasting him with Beowulf. It is a brief digression, and it refers to other stories of which we are not aware. This translation breaks the digression off into an individual poem, spoken in the voice of the poet:

Scop

If it's stories of Sigemund you're wanting,
I can tell you right now, we don't have enough ink.
I could speak from now until nightfall
with you scribbling away, and we wouldn't hit

the half of it. Not that you'd believe me anyway—
between him and his nephew Fitela,
they got into enough battles to fill a history book,
laid eyes on enough wonders to fill a dictionary.

But his most famous deed—the one they still shout for
when the hall runs out of beer and over with boasting—
he did alone, under the earth. That was when he killed the dragon,
impaling it on a sword standing deep in the rockwall.

He earned the treasure he carried out of that place;
a ship low-waterlined with gold and bright rings,
the serpent burning behind him.
He was the champion we had prayed for,

Growing stronger after Heremod's weakening,
when he was betrayed to the giants and killed.
That one brought sorrow to his people, grief to his thanes,
though only I am left to remember it now.

We had looked to our prince to save us, to protect
his land and his people. Beowulf is loved by all who know him,
but Heremod's hand fell heavy; his eye passed over
in a darkness that would not lift. I will not pass his story on.

The poet refers to having knowledge which his own contemporaries do not—“only I am left to remember it now”—thereby making the ambiguity of the references part of the world of the poem. He also refers to making a conscious choice to refuse to share his information, saying “I will not pass his story on”. This simultaneously explains why we as readers do not know the reference and draws attention to the time that has passed between *Beowulf* the source text and *Beowulf* the translation: we have lost this story because, generations in the past, the poet chose to lose it.

The treatment of the reference to the evil queen Modthryth, spoken about earlier in this section, takes a slightly different approach. My translation of the section of the poem discussing her is quoted below:

Modthryth

A woman hardens her gaze at a man staring soft-eyed.
At once he needs night air, or curls his shoulders over his belly,
struck—there was a time I could mouth her name to you

and we would nod into our cups. Now the name is unfamiliar.
I hesitate on it, tongue tasting an unfamiliar berry,

strange fruit. Let me tell the story again. Noble and terrible,
no one but her husband would dare approach her, for fear
they would be weight for a rope's end by nightfall.
How queenly is that, no matter how beautiful?
Born to be peace-weaver, then fills her country with death,

taking men's lives over nothing. But Hemming's kin put a stop to that.
You'll hear, if you wait round the table, how Modthryth calmed
once she was given to a young champion, sent away
over the whale-paths to marry. There she was good,
and known for her goodness; she was a noble wife to Offa,

the spear-brave king, who held his homeland.
From him came Eomer, Hemming's kin, grandson of Garmund—
but you don't know these names either? You knew an Offa once—
no matter. I tell these stories because they are the ones
told to me; I plant my feet in the schoolroom and sing.

The first stanza, with its reference to “a time” in which Modthryth’s name would have been familiar to both narrator and reader, informs the reader that this story was once common knowledge without implying that other modern readers might know it. In the last two lines of that stanza, saying “Now the name is unfamiliar,” my aim was to point out that our knowledge of Modthryth is limited because of time passing—the “now” could refer to a now contemporary to *Beowulf*, or contemporary to the reader; it is a deliberately ambiguous moment. The last two lines of the final stanza are intended to emphasise the fact that to tell the reader about Modthryth is to actually tell the reader a story. The reference to “sing[ing],” like several other moments in the translation in which a poet’s story is split off into its own poem, emphasises the performative aspect of poetry in *Beowulf*. By repeatedly describing a poet performing as well as giving poets their own voices, I attempted to inform readers of how a poet in *Beowulf*’s time (and, therefore, a *Beowulf* poet himself) would have performed. Furthermore, the emphasis on what each poet chooses to tell, or chooses to keep hidden, is intended to lead the reader to question what I as the translator am choosing to tell. The overall aim is to draw attention to the reality that any act of informing inevitably means the reader is not receiving objective fact, but the informer’s interpretation of events, and hopefully will impel a reader to engage with the ambiguity of both the poem and the poet.

The last type of ambiguity within *Beowulf*, and in some ways the most difficult to approach, is the ambiguity caused by physical damage to the *Beowulf* manuscript. As explained in Chapter 2, the portion of the source text describing the first appearance of the dragon has been damaged by fire. There are portions of the text which are entirely gone; rather than references in a linear text which we do not understand, these moments of ambiguity are about missing words or discrete pieces of information, and have been imposed upon the text by outside forces (Andersson 1984). I chose to translate this section of the text as follows:

The Dragon

This is an unknown door. We should not be here.
In dark of night, a dragon rules *is ruling, will rule*
a hoard in a barrow-hall, we cannot be here, the pen
in my hand shakes, I cannot write. The pen is a treasure
that burns—was I reaching? There is no light here,
I cannot see. I took in my hand
 what is in my hand, He will this,
he will come when he wakes and sees our trickery,
every household will know in its beams and bones
we have angered it. Who do we blame? A kinsman *a slave*
fleeing *the page spits my story back at me*, homeless,
finding a door we have no name for: *mwatide*, it means nothing.
Fear goes there. That is all.
The thing rises
 we have never been here, for god's sake
don't look
 fear overcomes him,
a space opens, he takes it.

Most of this translation does not play with space in this manner. It was my intention that by including areas of blank space in this poem as part of a larger translation which is written almost entirely in poems using regular line lengths, the visual appearance alone would cause the reader to question why it *looks* like there are portions missing. There are repeated references within the poem to not being quite sure what is happening (“I cannot see,” “we have never been here”), as well as metatextual references to being unable to write, and saying “the page spits my story back at me.” While I refrained from including an explicit reference to the page being unreadable or damaged, the overall effect of the poem is to draw attention to its negative space: the poem is called “The Dragon,” but the poem is much more about being blocked from seeing the dragon or understanding what it is doing.

3.3.1: The Translator's Presence

If a goal of translation is to open up potential meaning to the reader, it seems important to be explicit about the fact that there is a translator mediating the experience between target culture reader and source culture text. Shapiro may have argued that a successful translation does not call attention to itself, and some contemporary translators, such as Anthea Bell, still state their ultimate goal is invisibility and that the role of a translator is to “[spin] an illusion” (Bassnett & Bush 2006: 59), but most translators at this point would argue to create the illusion that the translator does not exist is to be deeply dishonest about not just the role of the translator, but the act of translation itself. Many translators who come from the field of creative writing go to great lengths to point out how their work is distinct from translating; while Don Paterson is avowedly not a translation theorist, and most translators would disagree with his opinions, his treatment of translation versus his original writing is nonetheless useful in a discussion of translatorial presence, particularly within a project focussing on the relationship between translating and writing. Paterson, in an afterword to his translations of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, insists that his translations, by dint of the creative impulse he puts into them, are not translations but *versions*, writing “[a] translation tries to remain true to the original words and their relations, and its primary aim is usually one of stylistic elegance . . . It glosses the original, but does not try to replace it. Versions, however, are trying to be poems in their own right” (Paterson 2007: 73). Paterson seems to view his translations as falling wholly into the mechanistic system of Source Language Word A = Target Language Word B that was described in the first chapter as leading me very far astray, while his 'versions' are translations in which he allows himself the same decision-making capabilities and artistic impulses as he does in his original writing. The fact that I continue to refer to Paterson's translations as such, rather than as versions, probably hints toward my opinion of his argument to a certain extent. The initial portion of his reasoning is rather quickly dispensed with—the fact that translation theory exists at all is an indication that all translators do not share a common and agreed-upon purpose in writing their translations, nor do all translators agree what the concept of translation does or should mean—but his emphasis on translation as a “gloss” is intriguing, particularly since his second excerpted sentence would seem to be saying that his versions are *not* attempted as a gloss, and that fact is what separates them from translations. A much more accurate description of the different approaches to translation Paterson is describing is the difference between a translation aimed at an academic audience,

where there is a presupposition that its readers will also be working with the source text, and a translation produced as an artistic work or as a record of interpretive reactions, where the audience will encounter only the finished work; to view these translations as different translation clusters allows each to be examined by the rubric they have respectively articulated about their interests and target audiences. In fact, most translators would contend that Paterson's point applies to translation as a whole; Bassnett and Bush discuss how a translator experiences a text in terms remarkably similar to Paterson, writing that "[t]ranslatorly readings of literature provoke the otherness within the subject of the translator . . . release ingredients from the sub-conscious magma of language and experience, shoot off in many directions, provoked by the necessity of the creation of new writing" (Bassnett & Bush 2006:25). The choice of the phrase "new writing" is an acknowledgement that translation must by definition involve choices by the translator that have not been (and indeed, cannot have been) set out by the source text. John Niles argues this same point in a survey of *Beowulf* translators in particular, arguing that "some stamp of the translator's own mind and style upon the text is bound to be part of the process of rewriting a literary work into a language other than its native one, and a firm stamp is sometimes preferable to a timid one" (Niles 1993: 876).

One solution to the question of the translator's presence is to avoid any potential slippage from translator to propagandist by being as honest as possible about the influences each translator has brought to the table. Scott describes this sort of translatorial voice as "idiolectal", where the translator's choices and contributions are viewed on the same plane as those of the source text's author (Scott 2000: 30); however, the reader must be aware of the translator's presence in order to register her voice. Scott approaches this by attempting to make his own associations and reactions to a text as transparent as possible; in the last translation of *Translating Baudelaire*, he integrates into his translation italicised excerpts of his own original writing and quotes from other texts evoked by his readings of the source text (Scott 2000). This type of collaged portrayal of a translation, and the process of translating, allows the translator to express not what the original text means, but what it means to the translator in her retextualisation of it, and avoids claiming authority from either the source text or the reader (Scott 2000: 3).

3.3.2: My Presence in *Beowulf*

This aspect of my project is the one which I feel has remained the most consistent from initial

conceptions of how I would translate to final draft. I knew from the beginning of my project that a central interest was how to produce a translation that contained acknowledgements of its own status as a translation within the target text, and to a certain extent this choice is somewhat binary: either the act of translation is highlighted or it is not. My strategy, though, has remained largely what I anticipated it would be from the beginning. This is not to say, however, that this aspect of my translation didn't cause me any worry. I began this project far from conversant in translation theory, and the efforts of writers such as Don Paterson to produce translations that seemed desperate to explain how they were not translations (and, it was implied, were somehow *better* than translations) made me worry that a translation that included significant alterations on my part would inevitably result in my project looking like just another translation cushioned in poet-speak from a writer seeking as much distance as possible from the source text's author. I was afraid the more experimental aspects of my translation would be seen as translation errors, or attempts to avoid the more difficult aspects of translating *Beowulf*, rather than deliberate choices. Because of this, my initial plans included much clearer delineations between the portions of my translation which I felt were more faithful and the portions which were written more in my own voice—in this plan, anything that I felt was my writing would be italicised, and any part of the text which I felt was a faithful translation of the source text would be left plain. (I hope the reader will forgive me for my naiveté.) The moment I began actually translating, I realised my stupendous error: everything I was producing was my own writing, whether I viewed it as more or less 'faithful' or not. Furthermore, everything produced was fully recognisable as my own writing, bearing what Baker has described as a translator's thumb-print, whether the print was stamped in my syntactic patterns, lexical choices I utilised repeatedly, or even in the more strategic arena of what aspects of the poem I chose to focus on. In this sense, my interest in using multiple voices within *Beowulf*, rather than widening the narrative scope of the poem, stamped it even more markedly as a text produced by me.

Efforts to create a text honest about the presence of a translator seem harder to isolate than the previous objectives discussed, perhaps because a translatorial presence is something that the finished translation is suffused with rather than a problem that provides individual difficulties to resolve. One strategy used to draw attention to my own presence was, contrarily enough, to call the reader's attention back to the source text. If the dishonesty of a translation is that its complete presentation implies that this is how this particular story has always been told, I would argue that triggering the reader's awareness of the source text will automatically remind the reader of the

translator producing the target text as well. My translation is not the first *Beowulf* translation to use this strategy; Seamus Heaney's presentation of the source text on facing pages to his translation produced a similar effect. At a few points in this translation, I included words from the original Old English text. The first example is in the third section of the poem which first describes Grendel:

3.
Border-wanderer, heath walker. The line
is crossed. *Se the moras hold—*
se grimma gaest, meorc-stapa.

The end of this stanza slowly shifts from a modern English translation back to the Old English original; I wanted the overall effect to be that of modern English disintegrating, almost as if the speaker was reverting back to her first language in terror. This portion of the source text was chosen deliberately, because it is a passage more easily readable by a modern-English-only speaker than other portions of the poem. The second line, “se the moras hold,” replaces the pronoun and noun of the modern English sentence: a full translation adding the modern English back in would be “he the moors hold”. It is likely a modern English reader, seeing the first two sentences followed by something that *looks* like a pronoun, will be able to catch the meaning of this phrase. The following phrase, “se grimma gaest,” sounds like its modern equivalent, “the grim guest,” and while the last phrase is somewhat more difficult, if the reader continues to navigate by sound the phrase “meorc-stapa” can be translated to “march-stepper”.

Interestingly, I discovered after translating this portion of the poem that I am not the first writer to utilise this strategy. John Felstiner's translation of Paul Celan's poem “Todesfugue” (translated as “Deathfugue”) uses the same strategy of using the untranslated source text as part of the translation. In “Deathfugue,” the repeated phrases “your golden hair Marguerite” and “your ashen hair Shulamith” are, at the end of the poem, written in their original German form “dein goldenes haar Margarete/ dein aschenes haar Shulamith.” Felstiner also slowly un-translates the phrase “Death is a master from Deutschland” as it is repeated, moving eventually to “der Tod is ein Meister aus Deutschland” in the final lines of the poem, giving the same feeling of the poem's language unravelling in despair. Because the untranslated lines first appear earlier in the poem in English, and because they sound relatively similar in their German and English versions, a reader with no knowledge of German will still understand what is being said. I was encouraged by

seeing another translator (and one, upon reading, I have grown to admire greatly) using this approach, and it is an interesting detail that we both chose to use a strategy of non-translation as a way to dramatise extreme fear and trauma.

A version of this approach is also used in a later section about Grendel, which I titled “The Moor-Stepper Comes.” While the original phrase “mearc-stapa” can be more literally translated as a border-walker or marsh-stepper, given both the similar vowel-sounds in ‘mearc’ and ‘moor’ and the fact that Grendel is later revealed to live at the bottom of a lake in a fen-like area, I felt translating with a nod to the sound of the source text was appropriate; while ‘marsh’ is a more direct translation, my desire to keep the end consonant relatively clear led me to choose ‘moor’ over ‘marsh’ in my translation. My aim was to have my reader catch at these moments from the source text and possibly strain to understand them; and from there to see the rest of my translation for what it is: a translation produced by a writer who has gone through that same process of grabbing at the Old English text.

By also providing multiple voices in the translation, room was left for the reader to wonder how many of those voices are the translator’s. Using modern poetic forms and diction reminds a reader that this translation has been produced by a modern writer. Using repeated motifs of writing, speaking, and performing keeps the creator and shaper of the text present in the story. Amongst those more general references, however, I have written a few moments aimed at explicitly acknowledging my own presence as a translator within the translated text. For example, the first stanza of “Baptisms” includes this digression:

Stories of Grendel passed through boats and caravans; the currency
of gossip, hand over hand—until even Hygelac and his men
heard. His best thane (*and here, you and I are on familiar territory,*
here my story begins) grew restless, grew eager

The parenthetical aside to the reader about the beginning of the story is somewhat unclear. It could be a fictional narrator speaking, or it could be the translator; both could conceivably be speaking about beginning a story. However, the rest of the poem is written in three-line stanzas; this interjection stretches a three-line stanza out to four lines, and it was deliberately written to fit into the existing stanza as one extra line-length that, if deleted, would reduce the stanza back to one regular three-line group. My intention was to make the poem appear to be uniformly written

in even stanzas with the one exception of this interjection; the interjection appears as though it has been imposed upon the poem from the outside. I intended it to look like a direct address to the reader from the translator.

4: *Beowulf*

A Translation

Prologue

Hwaet

Stop me
if you've heard this one before: the lands up north,
hoar-bent, frost-locked, need deeper plows
to dig them. Here is one.

Scyld Scefing

This is a story about coming and going. This is a story about the sea.
He came in with the first morning tide, lightly carried
in spite of the treasures in his boat—mailcoats, gold, gifts
the color of water at morning—rich omens, indeed,
for a baby still too weak to close a fist. At that age,
all palms lay open—an orphan's, a foundling's, or a king's.

In time, his hand hardened into one we knelt to as king—
all of us; from the ocean he came in on to the farther sea.
I was gathering kelp when we found him, my back unbent by age,
holding his squalling face in the hollow of my neck as we carried
him back to the hall, that first grey morning. I was repaid for that deed—
a small one, but one he was grateful for, if this lifetime of gifts

is any indication. We were lordless, in need, and he was a gifted
child—he took to his role of foster-lord, of king-in-training,
easily. Eager to assume what would always have been his, his deeds
came quickly—with a sword in his hand, his eyes glinted; a seabird
catching that first smell of salt. As his shoulders widened to carry
them, more and more retainers came—he marked his age

in men, not in years; a loadbearer in a burdensome age.
Some he won over with gold, tracts of land gift-wrapped
in rainfall that seemed to follow the line of his eye. Some carried
bodies off the field, the first and last tithing for a king.
I saw lifetimes of conquering and harvest, things I will not see
again; we have diminished, we are fallen—my one true deed,

performed again, taking him back to the grey death
he came to us from. He died in his sleep, of old age—
his grip on the pommel finally slipping, back to the sea,
back to a wooden boat—I carved the nails—and the gifts
we shroud him with. Gifts for a king, more than kingly,
gold he couldn't at his strongest, broadest height have carried—

And let them go, past the sightline of mist, let the sea carry
his gold, his body, and his boat—wherever it may, indeed,
to whatever shining demons, whatever black-hooded kings
may care to take my people's tithing for an age
we had no right to. Finally, my strength and my will gives—
let the tide pull him out of my hands, if the sea,

if the sea's unseen coast must have him, must carry
him off. This was a gift, this is the weakness of an undeeded
man, this is an age dying. This was a good king.

The crown passes: from Scyld to Beow, famous among men;
and to his son Healfdane, who ruled as long as he lived,
grey-haired and fierce under the Scylding's shield.
He woke four children to the world: Heorogar,
Hrothgar, and Halga the good; Yrse, the last,
sent off early to Onela, to brighten that foreigner's bed.

*The lineage runs like knots of a spine, like the swollen knuckles
of an aged woman by the fire, pointing: here is the story beginning.
Here are the words you want.*

1. Grey Skies

Buildings

Hrothgar built success in battles, honed his voice to be obeyed,
a sword-edge, a line on a map
a voice to be followed. His company turned into a band, a battalion,
a hall. His mind turned to it: the greatest hall we would ever hear of,
margins still smoldering, licking at the cross-hatches
the greatest hall for gift-giving,
the greatest hall.

The orders went out across his portion of the earth,
to adorn the dwelling. And early in Hrothgar's time, the roof towered:
it was ready. He named it, Heorot, a brandishing of roof-beams,
eaves arcing out into points of wooden horns.
He said it, and it was done. The fires inside, the feasting,
the treasures given out, gold eating its own tail.
The wide-gabled hall swallowed the sound, waiting for the surge
of flames that must come, that will come,
that came: the demon waited miserable in the darkness,
laughter spitting out from the mouth of the hall.
Guts of a harp were pulled, a poet's clear song to the night:

Who made this hall we stand in?
Who made the earth we tamp beneath our feet?
Who made the sun and the moon?
Who made what they illuminate?
And who knows enough to call them
what they are? Who knows the score?

The demon watched this;
the demon waited.

Grendel

1.
Up the borders,
up the moors,
lie the bones
of mine and yours.

Comes in darkness,
comes at night
to find you out,
to claw and bite

2.
There is a delta of blood trickling out of Cain. Here are its eddies:
giants fled to the groundrock of mountains; elves cold as spring water,

their eyes blink irisless from the middle of the stream. Spirits,
bodiless, leading poor farmers and shepherd-boys out into the swamps,

are here. All of them clutching rushes and snarling at God.
He is here, though I will not name him. The paper is burned out.

3.
Border-wanderer, heath walker. The line
is crossed. *Se the moras* hold—
se grimma gaest, mearc-stapa.

The Moor-Stepper Comes

At night, with the bright Ring-Danes settled in
after their feasting, he sought them out,
their bellies heavy with sleep, oblivious to sorrow.

Grendel was ready.

He seized thirty men and fled with the dying,
back to the darkness of death's house.

The sun glinted red off the walls,
a new sob-song of morning.

The famous chief sat joyless,
sorrowing for his men, for the traces
they left: blood in linen, torn-off nails,
clumps of hair on the doorjamb.

That night, he came again.

After that, it was easy to find men at a distance:
tucked next to cradles, pillowed in with livestock,
Heorot's belly sat empty.

Grendel fought with them all, the best house
stood hollowed and alone. Word of what they suffered
passed so far the word for it was different: *bana*,
bone, *bane*. Grendel conquered and was conquering,
a feud that would not end. A feud survivor, or a scorned man
we could buy off, but not him—for Grendel and for us
there were no reparations; the dark one sat in shadow.
None knew where he came from
or where he went; dawn took him.
Night brought him back. Heorot's lease ran in darkness—
everything but the throne. Grendel left it,
wouldn't touch it. God knows why.

Our spirits broke. Men sat in council, considering strategies,
(*my kingdom for the mastery of this*)
how to barricade their minds against his terror.
Some promised sacrifices, blood-links
at heathen temples, praying that a bloodier god
would help in a bloodier time. They forgot God,
if they knew their Lord at all, forgot heaven:
hell in Heorot pushed everything else away.
Heaven forgive those who threw themselves into the fire,
who forgot our greatest comfort and hope, who could not change.
Hrothgar sat, brooding; there was no hero
to push these thoughts aside.
We had no respite: night covered all;

the things in the dark had won.

Baptisms

Stories of Grendel passed through boats and caravans; the currency
of gossip, hand over hand—until even Hygelac and his men
heard. His best thane (*and here you and I are on familiar territory,*
here my story begins) grew restless, grew eager

for the sea. A boat was prepared. We did not blame him for leaving us
to chase after a folktale, a story on the wind—wisest and bravest of men,
we chose our champion long ago. We know the omens.

He took fifteen men with him over the seas. The ship was on the waves,
passing under cliffs, the current curled sand back to the sea.
The ship was a swan, her neck foamed with saltwater, she swam

with nothing to glint off her bright arms but sky. Time and black water
swept the boat, until foreign cliffs appeared: a deadline, a full stop.
Mail clinked in silence as the hull scraped on unfamiliar gravel.

We carried our swords out onto a glinting, sharp-edged shore
(thanking God for our safe passage). The sea-guard of the Scyldings
pressed his knees tight against his horse, waiting for the right tide to talk.

Tidings Come In

*Who are you, who come mail-coated, soldiers dipped in steel,
across the sea? I see you—I watch for glints of armour
in a moonless night, rustle of longboats against pebbles. No one comes
like this—no one pulls their boat in looking for a sentry,
polishing their shieldbosses in a noontime flush.
You're not raiders—that much is clear from your bright war-gear
and well-fed forms, from the span of your chief's shoulders.
But who are you, where are you from?—we don't trust outsiders,
and we've learned to fear strangers, so you'd better talk fast.*

Their leader knew the correct response. He was raised right:
*We are Geats, Hygelac's people. My father was called Ecgtheow—
you may have heard of him; your king will have done so.
We come out of loyalty, if you want our help—
you can guess why we're here. We've heard of the hidden terror
that moves among your people, the mounting corpse-falls and blood-debts.
If I can help Hrothgar clear his house, I mean to.*

The guard stayed on his horse, but his spear-arm relaxed.
*Fine words, spoken well. I hope your works are as consistent.
I will take you to Hrothgar, you and your men; my troops here
will watch your ships, with their fresh tar tacky in the sun.
We will watch until you come back for them, come back to the sea.
Time will tell who earns his passage back to your homeland.*

The anchors pulled and pushed in the breakers.
The forest fled before them, golden boar-crests
making their own way through the woods. The men hastened
until trees cleared; Heorot stood in daylight holding its breath.
Their guard didn't point out the hall. There was no need.
He turned his horse back towards the salt of the shore and spoke.
*My bed is by the sea, thank God. I pray you protect this one.
I will guard your boats until you come for them.*

The house-beams leaned in, vultures trading glances over a body.
The men marched with terrible swords and sea-weary shields,
awakening to the smell around them. The door of the hall sat silent,
held up by men waiting, their faces to the woods.
One picked Beowulf out and spoke.
*Where are those shields from? I am Hrothgar's herald,
and have never seen men with braver bearing approach our gates.
You look like you come more in boldness than banishment—
why have you sought us out?*

Beowulf answered, hard under his helm.
I sit at Hygelac's table. I would speak with your famous prince,

if he'll grant us the honor of approaching him.
Wulfgar responded. *I will ask the ring-dispenser about you
and your petition.* He passed to where Hrothgar sat,
old and very grey among his company, until he stood
before his lord's shoulder: he knew the customs.

*Here is a fresh breeze before you, my lord,
from the Geat people: their leader is called Beowulf.*
*He asks to speak with you. I think I know
why he has come, and I think it would be worth your while
to find out what he has in mind.*

Meetings

*I knew him when he was a boy; I knew his father.
I hear he has the strength of thirty men—quite a hand,
quite a blow behind it, and perhaps worth counting on.*

Be well, Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's man. I have done much in the time I've been given. Stories of Grendel have reached my homeland—stories of the best building on earth standing empty and useless—and so I have become Grendel's affair.

*Tell Beowulf to come here, and his men with him,
tell him they are welcomed by the Danish people.*

I told the wisest of my people I would come to you; he knows my strength. He saw when I returned bloodied from battle, covered in throat-gouts from five giants. He knows of sea-monsters I slaughtered in blackening waves. He knows what I have done for him, what disputes my fist settled, and now I will settle this score with your demon. His account is marked.

I shall offer him treasure—enough to build a bridge between us.

I only ask that you give us a chance to cleanse Heorot. I heard this monster fights unarmed—so I, too, will scorn weapons. We will settle this hand-to-hand, trust the Lord to send who seems right into death. If Grendel kills me, so be it—my men won't have to bother carrying my corpse back over the waves, as breezes carry the smell of my body over the sea. Grendel can make a meal of me, for all I will care. But send to Hygelac my best mail, if you can find it.

Fate moves as she must!

*God has sent us a champion, a sign of our grace
to stand among us. I have expected all this.*

Hrothgar's Welcome

So, Beowulf. You come to repay past favors
with a fight of your own. It may run in your family.

Your father fled here once, after he killed Heatholaf.
His own people refused to protect him; they were weak—
I mean no offense. He came, sea-mist clinging to him
after his desperate flight. My throne was still new wood.

Poor Heorogar, fresh in the ground—he was a better man
than I, but this youngster tried to fill his brother's boots.
We took your father in, sent boats of gold over water
to the Wulfings, and your father's loyalty was mine.

I was a good man then, and strong. Now I am shamed,
and my crown with me. Grendel empties my hall,
my warriors fade away. Fate and the monster take them,
and God could prevent it—he sees all, hears our cries

and turns away. Somehow I pushed Him from this place.
Night after night, men boast over great lakes of beer-cups
how they will stay the night, they and their broadswords
will haunt Heorot, waiting. The dawn comes red:

The walls stained and spattered, men missing,
the hall silent in the light.

Will you join our table,
scarred as it is? Tell us of your warriors in your time.

*A bench is cleared for the Geats together.
Ale pours into cups. A voice is raised—a poet,
words twisting through the night.*

Soundings

1.

Hey—aren't you the Beowulf who swam with Breca,
the two of you risking your lives and your people's futures
on a bet? I heard your women cried on the cliff-top
trying to stop you, your peasants looked at their fields
left open and unfenced to the borders, and prayed.

But you couldn't be held back, paddling through winter's whelm
for seven nights, bravest and best leaders of men!
I heard Breca beat you, that you washed up on the wrong coast
limp and near-lifeless, tossed with the rest of the refuse
the sea tired of holding. If you can't even best water, (*he drains
his glass*) I fear you may find Grendel too high a proof.

2.

The more you drink, Unferth, the more you have to say.
Truth be told, I was stronger than Breca. We swam
with naked swords against what stirred from the seafloor.
Try as he might, Breca could not outdistance me, and I
chose to stay with him. We swam for five nights,
until the north wind turned against us, roughened the waves.

Shoals of fish battered my feet, the waves pulled; something
grabbed me, pulled me to the bottom. I stabbed without seeing,
rose for a breath, and fell again. So it went all night.
I was hardly the banquet the sea-monsters hoped for,
though I did provide the bottom with its share of meat.

By morning the shore was littered with sharp-finned corpses,
monsters I had never seen. They will not frighten sailors again.
Dawn brightened the headlands, the shores I landed on—
as you said. Fate often chooses to save a man
when his courage holds. Would that your brother
had been so lucky, before you gutted him.

Clever policy, though it won't negotiate you out of hell.
If only Grendel stood between you and your throne—
you never would have needed me. Instead he takes his pleasure
in the flesh of men, while you sit awash in ale and anger.
We'll see what morning brings after the feasting tonight!

Approaching Twilight

It was again as before in the hall, with singing
and story-telling descants to clanking cups.
The gold-giver watched Beowulf and hoped.
At last Hrothgar grew tired—he felt the monster,
closing in as the sun sank. Men rose;
Hrothgar and Beowulf nodded
as Hrothgar wished him mastery of the hall:

*Since I was strong enough to lift my shield-hand,
I have never entrusted my house to another.
Now I leave it with you. Have it and, God willing,
hold it: think of the glory battle brings you,
and look to your sword! Do not close your eyes.
Anything you want will be yours, if you survive.*

Hrothgar and his men, and Wealtheow with them,
left the hall to Geats. One sentry stayed, watching
for the beast. Beowulf took off his iron shirt,
his helmet from his head, passed his sword
to his waiting attendant; before his bed he spoke:

*I hear Grendel is fearsome indeed. So am I.
I won't kill him with my sword, though I could,
but since he knows nothing of sword-bite or skill
with steel, I'll fight fair. If he fights weaponless,
so will I, and may God grant victory
to whoever claims the stronger hand.*

The men went to bed impatient, eyes open above their pillows.
None of them, mouths stopped in the night, thought
he would see his home again—his wife's soft eyes,
the oak-grove he played in as a boy.

The evening's stories returned:

they sat where dead men once sat, they gulped mead
over their own graves. But the weaver of fate uses thread
that can wring a neck or warm it, and God
was on their side, ruling them as he rules us all.

Grendel Comes

Night comes on. A walker glides in shadow across the ground.
The archer left to guard the horned building slept—as every night
for twelve years, guards slept, or fled, or disappeared. Who knows why?
Who knows how? The demon brought darkness with him, but he was awake
and angry, waiting the outcome of this battle swollen-hearted.

Grendel crossed from the moor, bearing God's anger,
coming to trap anyone left in the high hall. He came cloud-covered,
where gold plate decorating the eaves could be seen, glinting
on his battle-eager eyes. He had called upon Hrothgar's home
many times, but he had never received this welcoming.

The bars inside Heorot's doors shrank back as he touched them,
his shoulders swelling to fill the doorframe. The fiend came
into the hall, toenails clicking on flagstones. His eyes
carried molten gold in their centers, burning in the darkness.
He counted the legion of men sleeping silently around the room,

measuring them all against the span of his hand, the space
in his gullet. He grabbed a sleeping soldier closest to him—
one bed away from Beowulf—and tore him apart, snapping bone-links,
pulling at the knee cartilage with his teeth, mouth sucking for marrow.
He moved on, reached out towards the next bed with an open palm—

but the bed grabbed back at him, a dark figure sat up.
Grendel had never felt a harder grip—he had been caught.
He tried to run, but the hand held fast. Beowulf thought of his promise
and stood, grip tightening, fingerbones crunching, I could not
tell you whose. The monster wriggled, a landed fish;

Beowulf stepped into the turn, closing tighter. Grendel knew
he had made a mistake. The hall clattered with waking;
Heorot held clamor like a boiling stew-pot closed fast.
Danes in the darkness outside wept in terror at it,
at how Grendel must be slaughtering Geats where they slept.

Yell as he might, Grendel could not break free. Beowulf hacked
with his sword, (*the promise-giver breaks his promise, I hear you mutter,*
but what monster yields to mere words?) he and his men unknowing—
no weapon could hurt Grendel, no sharp edge or keen point
snap through the iron scales of his skin. The two careened
back and forth through Heorot, each hating the other.

A tear appeared: small, a shoulder-seam coming loose,
unraveling fibers of muscle and skin. Grendel's shoulder opened.
His arm unwound top to bottom, shoulder bones grinding
as cartilage gave way. He howled in pain and terror,

his body changing into something hurting and strange

at the hands of this hero. The last tag of skin broke,
and Beowulf was left holding an arm gone heavily slack,
collapsing onto the floor. Grendel fled to the open fens,
back to his home, the air in his wound running rivulets
of a current: death, death, death. Darkness took him.

Morning

The arm and scraps of shoulder, they placed under Heorot's vaulted roof,
along the beam braced above the throne. Men came in the morning

to wonder at it, to see the bloody tracks leading out into the hinterlands,
grass-blades smeared with blood, steps growing closer, deeper

as the monster faltered, muddy knee-hollows where he stumbled,
rousing himself to drag his body further. They followed him

to a mere, known for depths that concealed unknown monsters
and haunting mists. There was blood in the water. The waves churned,

full of knotting waterplants and gore. Somewhere beneath them,
Grendel lay. Hell would receive him. They turned back from the tide,

horses eager to return to their stables, old companions and younger men
flushed with a victory they would retell for the rest of their days.

They discussed what Beowulf had done: they agreed, over the earth
and under the sky's circuit, they couldn't think of a single man

worthier of bearing a shield. And they didn't blame Hrothgar—
certainly not, the gracious king! He couldn't protect his land,

but in all other things he was the model of a good king.
At times they raced their horses along the worn country paths;

other times a poet known for his story-telling composed a new song,
linking words together in a chain around a strong man, with a strong arm.

Scop

If it's stories of Sigemund you're wanting,
I can tell you right now, we don't have enough ink.
I could speak from now until nightfall
with you scribbling away, and we wouldn't hit

the half of it. Not that you'd believe me anyway—
between him and his nephew Fitela,
they got into enough battles to fill a history book,
laid eyes on enough wonders to fill a dictionary.

But his most famous deed—the one they still shout for
when the hall runs out of beer and over with boasting—
he did alone, under the earth. That was when he killed the dragon,
impaling it on a sword standing deep in the rockwall.

He earned the treasure he carried out of that place;
a ship low-waterlined with gold and bright rings,
the serpent burning behind him.
He was the champion we had prayed for,

Growing stronger after Heremod's weakening,
when he was betrayed to the giants and killed.
That one brought sorrow to his people, grief to his thanes,
though only I am left to remember it now.

We had looked to our prince to save us, to protect
his land and his people. Beowulf is loved by all who know him,
but Heremod's hand fell heavy; his eye passed over
in a darkness that would not lift. I will not pass his story on.

Thanksgivings Begin

When the men returned, midmorning light beamed on Heorot
as Hrothgar emerged from the women's chambers, to see
Grendel's remains for himself. He came up the steps with his queen,
looked at the hand, grey and dripping, under the high roof:

*Thank God for this sight! Thank God my hall survives to hold it!
Through the Lord's might, Beowulf has performed a miracle,
which our human wisdom could not contrive. Any woman who bears
such a man would say God was kind to her in childbearing.*

*Beowulf, I shall hold you as a son in my heart: anything you wish
within my power to grant, you shall have. I have given greater
to men who have performed far less. Your fame shall live
as long as your life lasts—may God reward your goodness*

as he has rewarded mine! Beowulf flushed, and spoke:
*It was a deed worth doing. You should have seen the monster,
encircled in his own arms, his muscles tiring, betraying him!
He meant to pin me into my own death-bed,*

*but he was the one trapped, as you can see in the rafters.
I wish I could have held him, kept him here whole,
but he was too eager to go. And he won't have any comfort
in his escape—he hasn't lived to fight another day.*

*Pain grips him now, and it will not loosen its hand
until his soul has gone to God's judgment.*

The warriors walked from their seats to where the hand hung,
inspecting pointed steel talons, spikes along the wiry forearm.

They decorated Heorot with fires and perfuming herbs,
gathered men and women for the feasting. The wall-tapestries
shone with twisted gold, entwining fingers in the firelight.
The broken benches were thrown into the fire for kindling,

deep gouges in the walls that the decorations couldn't hide—
only Heorot's roof had survived the night's battle unscarred,
when Grendel turned and fled, the stain of death already blooming on him.
Fast as he fled, death had found him; he slept through this feast.

Tally

We were rewarded, every one—treasures and heirlooms, my fortune made in an evening of toasts. The best went to Beowulf, a sword beyond price laid before him with a helm and heavy corslet, a hope chest of iron.

Who else could have done what we did? Who else earned these gifts? A crown-guard wound with wire, eight horses in plated bridles, feet lifting sharp and clean off the brushed earth before Hrothgar's throne, as our drinking

drew on. And a leather pouch, heavy for the battle-friend we lost in the fight, set in the empty seat at our table. There was no treachery by the Scyldings that night; Heorot was filled with friends, gathered fast around their ring-giver.

Grendel bled gold. He would have killed us all, if not for God and man's courage. He directed us that night, as he still guides us—I clutched my gift-sword tight and thanked Him for our leader's wisdom, for his cleverness. We live through good and bad, if granted life enough.

The Harper

Wood and string sang out joyfully, and I
stood forth to speak. My song was for Wealtheow,
though none of the men in the hall knew it.

My song was of Finn's people, surprised and taken,
and how Hnaef of the Scyldings fell on a Frisian field.

Hildeburh learned then to curse the Jutes and their honour:
she lost a son and a brother on that battlefield.
They both fell under spears, as fate demanded.

I sang for her, and for her sadness.

Hildeburh

We were armies without arms.
Finn was too weak to drive us out
or fight Hengest to the finish, and we
were tired, provisionless—we had to stay.

He swallowed the truce we tossed him:
Finn would empty us a hall, a throne
for Hengest to sit on, and Danes and Jutes
would own it and any treasure together.

Finn swore to it; Hengest made him.
He said those of us who survived
earned his respect, and none of his men
would be oath-breakers in word or deed,

or so much as complain. We smirked
to see Hengest settle into that second throne,
I can tell you. Then we buried our dead,
our old leader, her brother, among them.

Her whelp went on the fire as well,
she insisted on it. Flames lit the blood
staining their shirts, broken bodies bursting.
Fate does as it must. The fire took them.

We sat there, that slaughter-stained winter,
locked in sea-ice that wouldn't lift,
and those bastards sulking at our heels,
stinking faces I saw from under a shield.

Spring: but we exiles thought less of escape
than of vengeance, and when Hunlafing
brought battle-flame to Hengest, that warrior
took it up, and Finn fell in his own home.

The hall ran red, and our score lay silent
and settled. We looted Finn's house
and sailed with his woman back to Denmark.
We brought her back to her people.

*They waited to burn our dead
until we were back in Denmark.
I sat in the boat, till they came for me
with welcoming garlands. My hair*

*smells of smoke. That long winter
and the smell of pine on the fire—
my husband smiling at me, my smile
and its stupidity, a mead-carrying fool,*

*my son in the flames. A handshake
sealed in blood, and I believed it:
surely this stalemate must bring peace?
Surely your word must be your bond?*

*Their new leader, on my brother's throne
in my husband's house, I am a spider
in a web of spun gold. I didn't gather wood
for the pyre; it would have been unseemly.*

*The light on their faces, hissing sounds
as blood leaked out into steam.
Heaven take them, watch over them both,
I was surrounded by snakes.*

*Needles through thread, pricked fingers
passing ale from throat to throat.
I was born to this. A bright smile,
weaving peace with barbing threads*

*that snap and slice. I saw their faces turn
and could do nothing. My hands fell empty
as they fought and fell, my eyes
in my murdered husband's face.*

*This house is gone. My hall stands silent,
this prow lashes me back to my home.
I am entombed in ice, I am frost-locked,
and what blood can open these bonds?*

Peace-Weaving

The lay was sung to the end.
The minstrel put down his harp; games began again,
bench-noise brightened, and cup-bearers went forth with wine.

Wealthow walked under her golden circlet to her two champions,
nephew and uncle. There was still peace then; they were still true.
Unferth sat at his lord's feet—his spirit was still admired,
even though he cheated his own kinsman in a fight. Wealtheow spoke.

*Take this cup, my lord, and have joy in it.
Speak well to the Geats—be gracious with them,
and remember the gifts you've been given.
I hear you intend to make this warrior a son.
Heorot is clean, our ring-hall shines again—
be a generous giver, but leave your country
and your people to your own kind.*

*Hrothulf will treat our children with kindness
if you die before he does; he will repay his kinsmen well
if he remembers what we did for him when he was a boy.*

She turned to where her sons sat, Hrethric and Hrothmund,
with Beowulf between them. She carried a cup to him,
inviting him to drink; she gave him two arm-torcs afterwards,
a corslet and rings, and a great collar, a treasure from the earth.

I have never heard of a gift to equal that one—
not since Hama carried off Brosinga's necklace,
the shining jewel in its setting. He fled
out of the clutches of Eormanric's hatred;
he chose a more permanent gain.

Wealtheow

Enjoy this collar, Beowulf, and make use of it.
Make a name for yourself with your strength,
be a kind counsel. I remember you with this gift.

You have made such a name that men will remember you
as far as the sea surrounds the cliffs, where the winds rest.

Be blessed as long as you live; I wish you a wealth of treasure.
Be gentle in action, and joyful—here each warrior is true to the other.
Their minds are quiet, they remain loyal to their lord; these warriors
are united and ready. They drink well tonight; they will do as I ask.

Enjoy your wine, and when we go to our rest we will leave you
a hall spread with beds and pillows: sleep, in your greatest triumph.

The Collar

Eagles hunt high. Their feathers glint gold against the sun,
mica among the loam-specks of crows a sky-current below.
They hunt by sight—a rabbit tensing to the ground, grass tenting
over a field-mouse's flight—or light against a gold collar,

a signal-fire gone wild to an empty sky. Coast closer.
The collar sits on Hygelac still, prideful where he clasped it
that dark morning, waves pushing him towards Frisia.
He fell under his shield, and his people's flag covers them both.

A hand covers the collar and the eagle loses interest,
Franks come for golden carrion once the bravery of battle is gone.
Hygelac's men sleep with him still, downed scarecrows
guarding a field of corpses. The wind has changed.

2. An Opening Sea

Grendel's Mother

A man falls asleep, his bed beneath a hung shield of bright wood.
Who made it for him? Who will remember it after tonight?
He goes to sleep for the last time, drunk and too full, glad

for his bed, his armor set above him, a scarecrow to the night.
Identical under a blanket to the rest, but not identical—he squinted
when he laughed, he had a badly set thumb, but in a narrative made tight

with blood and bone, we forget these, we pare these things
away. This one would pay dearly for his beauty sleep,
for out in the dark, something of Grendel was waking.

His mother had met him at the end of his fleeing,
in the water-home Cain's mistake had left to them.
Grendel was torn apart, and she came looking for the meat

of her son, hanging from hooks in the ceiling.
Her home was a death-house, was becoming Grendel's tomb;
the hell-dam came—and was she less frightening

for being a woman?—hardly. The men in the dark room
screamed out that “he” was here, too caught in pain
and fear to see the claw at the end of an arm smooth

and hairless, sharp teeth in a softer jaw. There were drawn blades,
shields raised fast—helms sat watching, there was no time
for armor. She was quick—smart enough for a snatch-and-grab,

an eye for an eye, arm for a long arm. She went to the night;
the man she carried made no sound. He was dear to Hrothgar—
a companion who had been with him for countless fights

and shared victories, now blood-remnants spattered
on what must surely be a deathbed. Don't look for Beowulf—
he is not here, he went to another bed after the treasures

at the feast. There was unending uproar in Heorot.
She had set a bloody brand under their old feud,
carried a beloved hand out to the crows and wolves.
Morning came blind and blinking; sorrow renewed.

Wheel

I have never liked this kind of dealing, one bone
for another. The wise king looked about as if counting:
one day, his dearest thane was there, the next day gone,
time being counted out like knots along a backbone.
Troubles left, circled in the air, and returned.

Hrothgar Summons Beowulf

Beowulf was fetched to the chamber in the full force of daylight.
He came to the hall with his troop, floor-timber creaking,
and asked if his lord had spent a pleasant night,
blinking wide-eyed. He saw the grooves in the doorjamb.

*Do not speak of joy in my presence; it slices my tongue
as I form the word. Sorrow has come back—Aeschere,
my confidant and my counselor, is dead. We fought together
years ago, and the ringing of his sword against steel
has always sounded in the same key as mine.*

*Now he is slain—carried off, like so many before him,
and we thought the job was finished. We left the roots,
Beowulf, and they have returned—this is her handshake
in return for the one you gave her son. He fell in war
and the blow has come back—she has avenged him,
and now this debt hangs heavy round my neck.*

Where to Hunt

Out in the moors, past the town walls, we see such things,
the two border-walkers who keep the lost places. One has the form of a woman,
one a man, and the two walk an exiled path, a road scrubbed clean
of righteousness. The male is called Grendel, and I hope to God
he has no brothers lurking in barrows or badger-dens,
no father to complete their twisted family tree.

They live on slopes left to the wolves, grey headlands
where the wind takes off the tops of trees, where the mountain stream falls
into darkness, under the shadow of the cliffs. Not four miles from here
a mere lies in a rimed grove, a tree leans out over the water,
roots curling back on the hillside like whitening knuckles.

At night the lake drinks light from the stars: things grow blacker,
the water shimmers with a skin of fire. No man or child lives
who knows the paths along that riverbed. I have seen a stag
refuse to leap to safety—a bunch of its haunches, a drop
to ledges below, and my hounds would have gone hungry.

It turned from the edge, nostrils flared in terror,
and planted its hooves. Even with my dog at its neck it fell
where it stood, at the cliff's edge, for the rest to take.
The water from the lake stretches up in the wind, pulling at clouds,
the air is an ice-cold veil. The sky weeps: this is not a pleasant place,
but it is yours, Beowulf, if you come for that creature.

A Second Feat

Choke back your tears, old man.
*his contempt for weakness—the curse
of a club foot, the betrayal of time*
We'll do better to avenge your friend
that to mourn him; a clenched fist
is manlier than a wiped eye.
we line up behind you, curling fingers
Death comes to all of us, but a name
that lasts after death is the best bridge
to the next world we can hope for.

Let's follow the tracks. He
*she, strong enough to kill
your best man, and a woman*
will not escape into the brush,
or to a warren beneath the fields,
or into the trees—if the monster
stays *they stay, and us always*
with them on the seafloor,
we'll find him there.

The Track to the Mere

The track was easy to follow—no footprints, no twin ruts of dragged feet; the monster left a swath cut by bulk, thistles at the path's edge capped with blood.

It stood out against the fens, a rope of scar tissue twisting along an old man's back, following hills up into rocks, a slope up to the cliff above a lake, an open mouth.

Their tracker braced an arm against the tree at the clifftop, sick. Aeschere's head was next to him—hulled, discarded. Blood wove below them, mist foaming and spitting at the troop.

The warriors' knees buckled at the view below: water-dragons cleaving waves, leathery skin of serpents laid out on the rocks, catching what sun they could from the grey sky. They turned,

puffing up at the war-horn's song. One soldier drew an arrow, leaning over the cliff to give the muscle of his ash-bow room. He hit a thing in the water low in its belly. Its fins flailed

and slowed; a strong wave rolled it onto a rock. The men clenched their fists in revulsion: its swollen bulk, snout crammed with teeth, blood leaking black into the lake.

Beowulf turned stonefaced to his chainmail, shaking it out, war-cloth from a bloody clothesline. One of us helped put it on. Its weight clung to him, bone- and breast-plate settling

next to one another, familiar. Next his helmet—he shook his head, gauging if the cap would stay on in the rush of water. A boar along the helm-crest arched its back, defending

against Frisian sword-bite or a monster's maw alike. Unferth watched and handed him his own sword, Hrunting: iron-edged, blood-tempered, it had never failed any man in battle.

Who knows what was in his heart? Perhaps perhaps my suspicious eyes sell him short, perhaps he gave Beowulf what luck had been given to him. But he was afraid to kick through the waves himself, and we knew it.

He lost face that day. Beowulf spoke: *Hrothgar, remember our words when Aeschere's blood gleamed on your door. If I don't come back, send Hygelac what gold you would have sent with me.*

When he sees it spread out, he'll know what I've done for you; he'll know what you are worth. Hrunting will point as my compass, towards whichever world the Lord sees fit to send me.

After this performance, he leapt off the cliff—no pause for an answer or wait for applause, though I know he expected it—our prayers went with him anyway. The surge took him.

Stones Beneath the Sea

It was a day before he saw the bottom. (*or did it merely feel like one to Beowulf? The sun's path was hidden to all that day, under sky or under stone*) Before he turned his face from the seafloor, the creature was upon him—the water echoed his movement like humming strands of a web, and she came, pulling the water, seeing who disturbed its weft. She grabbed him, nails ready to slice eddies of crimson, drops of copper cordial, but his mail held: he twisted against her, a steely crab in his war-shell, her fingers stabbed uselessly. The she-beast dragged him through the spindly water-plants that fed on sea-sunk offal, leaves whipping in their wake; Beowulf couldn't draw his sword.

She broke through ranks of monsters—horned creatures, rows of flippers, twisted bodies knotting in rage at the sight of him—but bite as they may, his protection held. Before he knew it they were in a hall, the air fetid, rocks scratched out for a ceiling, and all of it lit by—he turned his head. Something gleamed in the dark. Then she came, and all light blocked out in the grappling of bodies. She swung an arm—Beowulf blocked with his battle-sword, putting his weight into the swing. It should have cut her head in two, thick-walled winter squash giving way to pulpy seeds within, but the blow rang steel on steel, the blade twisted in his hand like a tuning fork—the sword was useless. Beowulf let it drop.

And round the fire after, he told us he never thought of his safety as the sword clattered away, disappeared into the darkness, he just tossed away his sword. After it failed him: how brave, but I toasted with the rest and kept my mouth shut.

He grabbed at her hair, twisting it between his knuckles, threw her to the ground. She sprang, grabbing with pointed fingers, and as he stepped back his ankle turned—he stumbled, fell on the rocky floor, and the dam saw her chance. She sat on him, her knees weighted bags on his shoulders, stabbed at his chest with a broad, bright dagger. She wanted to avenge her only son, her only child, but Beowulf's corselet blocked her blade, it would not let her in. Beowulf would have fallen to his end deep under the earth, if it hadn't been for the war-mesh's help. Beowulf wriggled like the fish he had fought, found his feet—and found something else, too: an ancient sword, edge still gleaming, a worthy weapon left from the time of giants. No normal man could wield it—no man living but one.

It sprang to his hand, the animals along the ornamented sword-hilt turning upwards, as if they and their wielder were all gripping the blade. Beowulf,

holding the sword of long-dead ghosts, in a stone coffin
under the water, in the belly of the earth, turned
in what might be his burial mound, and swung.

The sword caught the monster hard on her neck, snapped it
with noise like wire breaking. The tent-pole of her house
was broken; she fell to the floor. The sword shone red,
ice wrapped in rose petals, everything tipped in blood.
A light beckoned from the corner. Beowulf tensed,
sword across his chest like a benediction, ready to strike.
Grendel: greedy Grendel, man-devouring Grendel, lay on a bed
thick with marsh-leaves and filth, a husk among cattails
and reeds, the hole of his shoulder-knot towards Beowulf
like an open, beckoning palm. There was a debt to be paid.

Grendel's throat babbled silently as Beowulf took the head,
gave it the same answer as his arm. He dove into the water,
hilt and head in hands. The water slowed, and stilled.
The creatures fled when they felt her death-throes.
The sea-cave's mouth was closed. I can tell you no more,
though I have seen it: there is no one left to speak for it now.

*After he dove, we sat on the cliffside, watching the ripples calm,
then ripple again. The water changed: churning, boiling on itself,
growing dark with blood. I saw Hrothgar's mouth go slack,
I saw men move their eyes away, staring at the horizon.
He was a good man, they said. We would not see his like again.
We knew the woman in the water had taken him.
The air grew colder, settling. I saw Hrothgar leave leaning on his men,
an old man. We sat under the exhaled lung of the sky, sick at heart.*

The blood on the giant's sword sank in, eating at the metal,
salt on an iron hinge. The sword was an icicle at the world-turn of spring,
melting, winter's chains falling away. Frost-bonds unlocked.
In the dying light from his sword, Beowulf saw treasures—
gold piled in corners, jewels left where they lay like rotten fruit.
He left them all—everything except Grendel's head
and the hilt that was left. The blade was gone, melted away
from forge-lines outwards, the hell-dam's venom
taking the iron with it in a final blow. It was enough.

Soon he was swimming: an upwards dive, water passing unchecked
through a sea barren of dark creatures, barren of life.
Beowulf made landfall with his cargo, the hilt heavy, head
already swelling with lake water. We ran to him then,
rejoicing in his body, dripping and unharmed.

We pulled off his armor, rivulets running back
to the drowsing lake, the water's face turned away, hidden
beneath clouds of staining blood. We went back with light spirits:
the country laid before us, orderly, the track was familiar.
Four men took Grendel's head on staves between them,
knotted him to it by his hair. We came to the hall,
brave in war and victory, Grendel's head dragging
along the floor, his cheek catching, cold and grey as a stone.

For Hrothgar

Here is your prize, given with gladness. It didn't come easily.
Hunting didn't help, but I found another weapon.
I killed the house-holder with it, and her blood
burned the blade away. I took the hilt and the head, slaughter
for slaughter. I promise you, you may sleep free from care
with your warriors, with your farmers and children—
nothing crawls dripping from the lakes for you;
blood has washed that road away.

A Foreign Script

The words spiraled down the hilt: can you read them?
They speak of an ancient battle, of water rising higher than giants,
of monsters falling in an onrush of water
the mountains could not hold. This was a cleansing.
The runes say who they were made for, who the snakes
on the handle twisted for, who they hunger to serve.

Hrothgar's Thanks

This story will spread—people will retell it as if it was their own,
people will be proud of it. Not like Heremod's feats for Ecgwala.

He was nothing to rejoice in. His growth was no flowering,
but a withering on the vine that would not fail. He cut down companions,

each one falling to his harvest, until he turned away from human joy alone,
from his name, from the strength God gave him above all others.

He lives on joyless, an affliction to his people. You know this
of course—you have virtues of your own; I recite this story for you.

It's a wonder how God can give a man everything: wisdom, land
or lordship. He holds all the cards. Sometimes one man gets everything,

a country in his fist. He lives in plenty—not aging, not ill, his compass
points true, with nothing wrong until arrogance turns inside him,

opens its eyes: death is near. It comes at the head of an arrow burying deep,
it comes at any time. He owns too little, he can never own enough,

he hoards anger in the cave of his heart. His gifts lie tangled and ungiven,
and what's been ordained is forgotten and left to fall: he cannot share his honor.

It happens: the foundations of the body fall, the house crumbles. We die.
Cut down thickets of anger where you find them, Beowulf, and choose better:

choose eternal rewards. Your strength follows the sun in full flower,
and it will for seasons. But things will turn: illness, or sword's edge come;

a grasping mouth of fire, flood's unrelenting rush, a ruined harvest;
sword's bite, a spear on darting wings, or failing these, old age

that withers and twists you, a light dying out of your eyes. It will come,
dear Beowulf, and death will come for you. This sky has seen me

a hundred half-years, war has watched me coming and fled. But things turn:
a scale shifts, a wheel's set in motion, sorrow follows joy. Grendel came,

and his coming weighed upon me. Thank God I have part of my life left
to see him dead, see his head dripping onto my floorboards. God is good.

Rest

Night drew its cloak; warriors' faces grew dark.
The senior guard arose: Hrothgar, grey hair shining
in the moonlight, knew it was time to depart.

Beowulf wanted rest as well, went to his bower
travel- and battle-weary. He put his head
on foreign pillows, slept in a foreign house.

His dreams knotted his brow, but the place?
—night comes home and pulls her curtains tight,
I can see no more. The hall towered wide-gabled,
gold silent against the raven-wing of night.

Leavetaking

Morning came, light after shadow.
The men hastened, eager to be away,
Unferth with the rest. Beowulf thanked him,
said he couldn't be blamed for his failing sword.
(*That was a gallant warrior—getting one last dig.*)
And then, shields locked, ankle-braces tightened,
warriors followed their prince to the high seat.

*Our homes are horizons away, our lord waits
for our return. If you have need again, I'll know—
if the waves pass tidings of your invasion,
if we hear foot-stamps of enemy soldiers against you,
I will be here with a thousand men. Hygelac will back me
in word and deed. If he comes to your court,
he will find friends here.*

Hrothgar answered:

*The Lord whispers words to your heart;
you speak them wisely. You are strong, in arm
and spirit. If a spear takes Hrethel's son, or sickness
leaves him cold and still in his castle, your people
could not do better than to replace him with you.
The Geats and Danes will live peacefully, one
by the other—no more bloodshed, as long as this hold
is mine. There will be treasures shared, and words
called over the seabirds' bathing-pool, curved hulls
bending to each other like embracing arms.
I know these people as I know you, and we are friends.*

There was more treasure given, where we all could see it,
and the men kissed and embraced. Hrothgar's head dropped
onto Beowulf's shoulder; hidden, his face fell.
*I feel it in my heart, that this is our last parting,
our last meeting: I will not live to see this man again.*
Beowulf walked, proud in the gold he carried, proud
on the grass leading to the shore, proud in his youth,
his strength, his leaving. The boat rose, expectant, on anchor.

Hrothgar's Requiem

And why should we blame Hrothgar for his wet eyes,
for his weakness? He was a good king, blameless, until age
—that whisper in the ear, that tremor in the arm—began to tell him
that spring no longer flowered for him, that one day
frost would hold. He lost his strength, then, and in time his joy:
that sorrow comes for all of us, if we are lucky and long-lived.

Sail

The men came to shore: high-spirited, the forest silent
beneath the sound of their voices, their armour creaking,
stamping of feet. The coastguard greeted them,
rode to welcome them back to the sea. Treasure stacked
on the broad sand: wargear with jewels and twisted wire,
horses with necks curved as the prow before them.
The boat-keeper was rewarded with a gold-bound sword,
the mast towered above Hrothgar's generous gifts.

The ship swept away. Sail-ropes for open water
lashed the mast, sea-wood groaned and creaked.
It sailed, foam bubbling at its throat, waves glinting
on prow-rings. They aimed for headlands, waiting hidden
beneath Geatish cliffs. Finally, wind thrust the keel onto sand,
the boat rested. The harbour-guard had been watching for them—
the broad-ribbed ship was moored to the sand, safe
from trouble-seeking waves.

The warriors carried treasures
to Hygelac, son of Hrethel, to their own hall by the sea-cliffs.
Their castle and king stood mighty, and their queen Hygd—
very young, but very gracious, even in her newness to the house.
Nor was she stingy with her gifts, like Modthryth.

Modthryth

A woman hardens her gaze at a man staring soft-eyed.
At once he needs night air, or curls his shoulders over his belly,
struck—there was a time I could mouth her name to you
and we would nod into our cups. Now the name is unfamiliar.
I hesitate on it, tongue tasting an unfamiliar berry,

strange fruit. Let me tell the story again. Noble and terrible,
no one but her husband would dare approach her, for fear
they would be weight for a rope's end by nightfall.
How queenly is that, no matter how beautiful?
Born to be peace-weaver, then fills her country with death,

taking men's lives over nothing. But Hemming's kin put a stop to that.
You'll hear, if you wait round the table, how Modthryth calmed
once she was given to a young champion, sent away
over the whale-paths to marry. There she was good,
and known for her goodness; she was a noble wife to Offa,

the spear-brave king, who held his homeland.
From him came Eomer, Hemming's kin, grandson of Garmund—
but you don't know these names either? You knew an Offa once—
no matter. I tell these stories because they are the ones
told to me; I plant my feet in the schoolroom and sing.

Homecoming

Beowulf set off with his companions along the shore,
the world's candle shining over them and the broad beach.

They came eagerly to where their champion, Ongentheow's slayer,
shared out his rings. Hygelac had heard of Beowulf's return,

was waiting when he came—alive, unharmed—into the palace.
Hygelac ordered the floor cleared, a space made for Beowulf at his feet.

The survivor sat down with the king, after greeting him
with the ceremonial words—words by rote, of course,

but heartfelt. Haereth's daughter moved, passing mead-cups
with her caring hands. Hygelac began: *So. How did you fare, Beowulf,*

after you decided so suddenly to seek out distant battles at Heorot?
Are Hrothgar's problems solved? I've been worried,

riding a lake of my own sorrow's surges—I asked you, remember,
not to seek an evil spirit who doesn't know to count you as his enemy,

to let the Danes test themselves against Grendel's anger alone.
But let's not quarrel now: I thank God to see you back safe.

Beowulf's Version

What happened between me and those two monsters is no secret.
They made the Scyldings' lives a misery, but I avenged all that;
Grendel's kin does not live to boast of another dawn-clash with me.

Where to begin. I greeted Hrothgar—he remembered me well
as Healfdane's son, as a man worth knowing. I sat with his own son.
I wager I'll never be under a roof with such company again.

At times the queen, their bond of peace, passed, praising the men—
she gave a handful of torcs out before she returned to her seat.
Sometimes Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, carried their cups.

She's promised to Ingeld, Froda's son—that's Hrothgar's doing.
He believes it will make their people friends, settle his share
of feuds and killing. But I don't know of anywhere that buries spears

with a slaying and lets them rest, no matter how good the bride.
The Heathobard lord will be as angry as the rest, to see a Dane walk in
with their woman on his arm, with their heirlooms on his chest.

Then an old warrior, a cup between his hands, sees the ring—
a man old enough to remember it and how it was lost,
how it was taken at a bloody spear-point—that's a grim memory

to hold alone, and he'll share it with a young champion at his side,
to test his spirit: *Maybe you, friend, recognise that sword as well—
it's the one your father carried off to battle. His last, wasn't it?—*

*when Danes struck him down, took the sword after Withergyld fell,
after the deaths of so many? Now some whelp walks exulting in it,
like a boot at your back, boasting of murder and bearing your treasure—*

treasure that is rightfully yours. He whets the young man's mind with words,
until their woman's man lies bloody-bearded for his father's battle,
a score balanced on a blade. The boy will escape, running and alive, but the rest—

there will be oath-breaking and sword-clash, and Ingeld will boil with hate;
against that heat his love for his wife, his foreign beauty, will cool.
So the Heathobards' loyalty, their friendship—that will not count for much.

But let me tell you about Grendel, my treasure-giver, so you'll know
what came afterwards. Once heaven's jewel crossed the earth, Grendel sought us
where we waited, still whole, guarding the hall. Battle's hand came down:

Hondscio was the first to fall dead. Grendel ate him, swallowing the body
like a man swallows a pilchard. And he wasn't done; he would have left

full-bellied and empty-handed, but he wanted to test my strength.

His eager palm stretched towards me. Some kind of sack or bag
hung behind him strangely seamed, clasped with devil's skill and dragon skin.
He would have tossed me in with the rest, but I grew angry, I stood up.

It would take too long to tell you how I paid him back for each killing,
each mouthful, but I brought you honor. He escaped to enjoy the dregs of his sorry life,
but a trace of him remained—his hand in the beams, and he left humbled.

I was rewarded as the Scyldings' most deadly friend, with plated gold
and treasure, when morning came and we sat down to the feast.
There were tales and songs. An old Scylding told stories from long ago,

sad and true, one night a strange story for their great-hearted king. The old man cried
for his youth, his battle-strength long gone, his heart welling up.
We spent the day there, remembering and forgetting, until night came again.

Then Grendel's mother, ready for revenge, set on her sorrowful journey.
Her son died in battle with the Wedras. The monstrous woman got her own back—
one man was slaughtered. Aeschere, Hrothgar's counsellor—she snuffed him out,

a vanishing light. That terrible morning we couldn't burn him, death-weary at dawn,
no fire to spark or pyre to put him on; his body was carried off, a fiend's embrace
in the dark under a mountain. That was Hrothgar's greatest sorrow.

The prince begged me to make a battlefield of the seabed, to risk my life
in a press of water for a full reward. And I did it: I dove in, and now it is known
far and wide that I found the guardian of the deep. We fought hand-to-hand,

the lake's blood boiled, and at last I chopped off the head of Grendel's mother
with her own gigantic blade. I wasn't yet fated to die. They gave me more treasure—
Hrothgar is in all things good and generous—and now I bring them to you.

I depend on you, Hygelac; I have little kin, and only one lord. Hrothgar gave all this
to me, and begged me to tell you this story: Heorogar had it, and passed it to Heorowearð,
loyal though he was. Without your grace I am nothing, and so it passes to you.

Gift-Giving

Let me tell you what happened next. We brought in four horses,
stamping and snorting apple-dark in the hall. He gave them willingly,
free of any nets—no strings attached, no knots; just faith, sure
and strong in himself and in the strength of his companions.

I heard Hygd had the neck-ring Wealtheow gifted, with three horses
sleek under bright saddles. We thought well of Ecgtheow's son then—
his deeds were famous, he walked tall and sure in glory.
He never struck at friends or strangers with empty tankards,

he did not have a savage heart. Oh, he's quite the hero now, but I know
his tough time of it, still green, when I heard him called a coward,
when the court would say full-voiced how he was lazy and slow.
But a change came on him, a wheel turned; his glory flowered.

Then Hygelac had Hrethel's heirloom brought out; a finer sword
than the one laid across Beowulf's lap was never shown.
He was given a harvest-full of land, a hall and throne.
They had right to it: one above another, and our kingdom under both.

The sun spun in the heavens, faces turned. In the crash of battle
Hygelac fell, and his son Heardred cut out from the shield-wall.
Next they came for Hereric's nephew—that time looms black
and dripping; I will not speak of it. Finally the land and hall
were Beowulf's alone. He kept it fifty winters, frost after sun,
until we all were prosperous, and happy, and old. Sorrow turned.

3. Smoke Rising

The Dragon

This is an unknown door. We should not be here.

In dark of night, a dragon rules *is ruling, will rule*
a hoard in a barrow-hall, we cannot be here, the pen
in my hand shakes, I cannot write. The pen is a treasure
that burns—was I reaching? There is no light here,
I cannot see. I took in my hand

 what is in my hand, He will this,
he will come when he wakes and sees our trickery,
every household will know in its beams and bones
we have angered it. Who do we blame? A kinsman *a slave*
fleeing *the page spits my story back at me*, homeless,
finding a door we have no name for: mwatide, it means nothing.

 Fear goes there. That is all.

The thing rises

we have never been here, for god's sake
don't look

 fear overcomes him,
a space opens, he takes it.

The Barrow

There are many of these houses in the earth—built for men from days
passed out of the memory-house, names we no longer know,
who hid their treasures in the earth. Death carried them away,
until the last left—most faithful, most lonely, of all men most alone—

felt the earth turning, and knew the dark eyes opening upon him.
His barrow stood ready on the headland, stood by the sea.
His arms finally empty, the man spoke: *Earth, hold what men
cannot, our gear welcomes your grasp! My people are carried off.*

*The hall that held their shouts lies still, its mouth has stopped.
No hands grasp a sword, no lips pull from plated cup. Men
who made these things are gone. The burning helmet has lost
its best ornament; the battle-mask shuts its eyes; coats that held*

*against sword-bite and spear-thrust unweave themselves
and decay. The harp plucked in joy is silent, horse's hooves
strike happier courtyards I cannot see. The hawk that swept
through our hall is gone, passed into outer darkness.*

He spoke in sorrow and was gone. No one can say when,
or where, or who he was, when death finally found him.

The Wheel Turns

Something found joy in it:
a ravager saw it open to the sky, filled it with flame,
flying in a night enfolded in fire. He guarded it
for three hundred years, until an unlucky man enraged him,
unlocked the spring. The man returned to his master,
his trembling palm filled with gold, a cup's open mouth
saying *peace, peace*. The hoard was found
and raided, and his unhappy wish was granted.
The treasure stood unveiled and ancient under the sky.

The dragon woke. He slid along stone, he found the faintest traces
of a desperate, wheedling foot-fall, hugging stone walls,
close enough to warm his heels on dragon-breath. (*And here is one
graced by god: Daniel in the dragons' den.*) The hoard-guard searched,
sniffing out their paths, circling his barrow furious and fire-hearted.
He twisted and turned—the cup became the only cup,
the only cup in the world—everything stank of men, of tampering,
and night could not come soon enough. Daylight failed
and the dragon went forth in flame.

There was joy in his breath,
in his horrible exhaling—he burned everything before him,
people screamed at their bright houses burning, at the earth
baking helpless beneath them. He left nothing alive.
At dawn he returned to his barrow, happy and hated;
the belt he tied round the Geats smoldered in its own ash.

News was brought to Beowulf—the monster threatening his people,
burning his own hall, twisted like wax into bright fire and nothingness.
He mourned it. Beowulf feared he had angered God, he had broken
an ancient and unknown law; the champion worried at his own doubt.

His hall was lost to the dragon; the land burnt out to the sea.
The king fought back against despair, and prepared his revenge.
He ordered a curious shield made, forged entirely from iron—
he knew the forest could not help him, linden-wood
would not hold against flame. (*The metal, tempered in fire,
singing out a new age, and the two deaths required to bring it.
Beowulf, we sing for you, through voices choked with soot.*)

Beowulf turned from his people—no troops to track the dragon,
no army massed against it. He chose single combat, as he always did,
for he had been in tight spots. He knew the narrow places of the world:
what arm could match his own?

I saw Hygelac fall,
struck down in the bloodbath of Frisia, Beowulf escaped by water,
swimming for his life: he carried the armor of thirty men along with him.

Few who shouldered shields against him
could hope to return home. Beowulf, sad and alone,
returned to his people. Hygd offered him heirlooms,
the throne itself—sick at heart, she knew her son could not hold it
with Hygelac gone. He refused and stood at Heardred's right hand,
ready and respectful until Heardred was old enough,
manly enough, to rule his people himself.

Two exiles, Othere's sons, came out of the sea;
they rebelled against their ruler, the best of the sea-kings.
Heardred received them, and through them his own death;
he lay lifeless in his own hall for his hospitality.
Heardred dead, Onela sailed home again, leaving the throne
to Beowulf; there was a good king.

Beowulf waited;
his help came slowly, but sure-footed: the other son,
unhappy Eadgils, was sent weapons and warriors over open sea.
Onela fell in his vengeance. Beowulf and his people were satisfied.

And so it went: Beowulf outlasted blood-feuds and battles,
until the dragon came. He set out with eleven men
in search of the serpent. By then the cup had come to him,
and the cup-holder with it—cowering and cowardly, the thirteenth man,
guiding them to a cave by the fretting sea. Inside, the dragon,
waiting, watching; eager for a bargain to be struck.

Beowulf rested on the headland, feeling fate approach,
restless and ready for death. His body's clasps were loosening,
his soul growing pinions, preparing for flight.

An Inventory

I have seen times like these. I was seven when Hrethel received me from my father,
protected and loved me like his own boys; Herebald, Haethcyn, and my own Hygelac.

Herebald's death was wrong—at his brother's hand, a terrible accident. A bent bow,
a wide shot, and Herebald struck down by Haethcyn: a crime without criminals,

an accidental murder. How would one avenge it? We mourned
like a man living too long, lived to see his son ride young on the gallows.

He sings an elegy as his son hangs, food for ravens, and he cannot help him,
old and wise as he is, cannot do anything. Each sunrise reminds him

his son journeys beyond his reach; a second son is useless in his father's hall.
He wanders through the orphaned hold, a home for wind; horsemen sleep in their graves.

The harp lays un-sounded; there is no happiness there. Alone, he goes to bed with his grief.
Everything is too big—the growing fields, the houses—too far away to touch.

Hrethel endured sorrow-tides for Herebald; his score couldn't be settled,
and Haethcyn became a stranger to his father. Hrethel lost all joy in life

and turned to the light of God; he left his hall, his home, his heritage
to his sons that survived—for all the joy they had in it—and turned away.

Then the real bloodshed began. The sea between Swedes and Geats ran red;
we held fury between us. Ongentheow's sons tossed the feud between them,

no friendships could hold. The hill of Hreosna was a lightning-rod to slaughter.
We matched them blow for blow, and Haethcyn marked a final tally—

his kinsman paid his killer in steel. Eofer split Ongentheow's helmet
and the head inside it; he fell pale and silent on the hill. Our hands did not falter.

I paid Hygelac the same way—he gave me a path in gold, I marked its miles
with my blade. The map was good; we never looked elsewhere. I was first

into battle and I'll remain so, as long as my sword and footing hold. So it's been
since the beginning, since Daeghrefn fell in front of me. I didn't need an edge then;

his heart stopped from my battle-grip alone, crushing his bone-house.
Now my hand must do, one last time. I fought as a boy, as a man—

and I'll fight as an old guardian, if this dragon dares to meet me! Sun and sea,
hear the last boast of a hero, mark this as a day worth watching.

Once I tore Grendel limb from limb. If these hands were fireproof, I'd risk them
against dragon-flame, but his venom requires a more potent antidote.

Iron shield and mail-coat must do. The dragon will be granted no retreat
and no quarter; there is one life in the balance between us two, and darkness

lies waiting for whoever fate turns against. These words are enough:
I spit them at the sky that supports this monster; this day will be remembered.

Watch and lay witness, which of us weathers our wounds. This is my fight:
I lay hands to it. Either I claim the hoard and its keeper, or battle claims me.

Dragon Flame

Beowulf stood with his shield, brave and sure under his helmet,
and crossed towards the cliff. He knew his own strength:
this was not the path of a coward. He had fought countless battles,
he had seen blood spill like waves battering a cliff-face
and come away to speak of it. Beowulf saw an arch in the stone
spitting out a boiling stream, steaming angrily in the open air.
He couldn't stay, for heat and threat of dragon-flame. His chest swelled—
Beowulf's words came in a battle-shout, challenge sounding off stone.

The dragon heard him, recognised with hatred the sound of a man's voice.
This was no time for peace. The monster exhaled steam out of the stone;
the earth seemed to snarl. Beowulf swung his shield against the stranger;
the dragon's heart burned in angry joy. Beowulf drew his sword, heirloom-edge
aiming sharp eyes towards the coming battle. Each knew this went to the end—
inside, each was afraid. Beowulf stood under his shield, unyielding;
the dragon knotting and unknotting, a hand flexing for a fist, fingers itching
at a bowstring, a burning arrow. It went in flame to meet fate.

Beowulf's shield held even shorter than he hoped; this was the first,
the only time he was not marked for victory. His sword-hand raised,
he struck at the beast shielded in the terrible markings of its scales,
but the blade failed and glanced away; its teeth found no purchase.
The guardian of the barrow felt it and snarled, growling fire to battle-light.
There was no victory here—for Beowulf, the journey from this world
to the next would be a hard one, the steps slow and unwillingly taken.

The terrible one came again. The dragon's breast heaved with hope:
Beowulf, the leader of his people, stood wrapped in flame.
His companions fled to the woods, hiding, terrified for their lives.
Only one's grief burned to a stronger forging—only Wiglaf,
Weohstan's son, could not toss aside the claims of kinship and run.
He saw Beowulf in the crucible of his helm, burning, and remembered
the favour he bestowed—the wealthy hall of Waegmunding, land-rights
given to his father before him. He could not hold back, much as his arm
might quake—it would draw his sword, his shoulder bear his yellow shield.

Branding

The sword was the legacy of Eanmund, Other's son, who died alone
at the hands of Weohstan. He bore it to Eanmund's kin,
a sword returned by sword, but Onela refused it and gave it back,
the burnished cap and mail-coat. He didn't mention the feud,
the death that brought Weohstan with death-gifts to his hall,
though Weohstan killed his brother's son. They passed to Weohstan,
and his son became their keeper, hoping he might bear fruit
as noble as his father's.

This would be his first test.

His spirit would hold unmelting; his father's sword defied failure.
The dragon, fire-filled on the battle-field, would find that out.

The Last Battle

But I am ahead of myself—I grow impatient for the dragon's death and tell the punchline wrong—we are not to the death-blow yet, we are with Wiglaf, feet shaking but sure on the ground, calling to his comrades.

*I remember long nights in the mead-hall,
when we promised our lord we were worth the gifts he gave us,
we would repay him in our time. He chose us—he plucked us out
and raised us to his table; he saw the strength in our arms.
He wanted to take this alone, our shepherd in a last dark valley.*

*Now he needs us—we should go to him, help him through the flames.
By God, I would rather cover myself with that fiery blanket
than return white and unmarred, carrying my clean shield home.
I am not fit to hold it unless I can bear it in defense of Beowulf
against that monster. The deeds he has done deserve better
than fighting and falling alone. We must share it with him—
our battle-coats will shield us, our swords will aim together.*

He crossed to Beowulf, stumbling in thick smoke. *When I was a boy,
you swore that while you lived your name wouldn't leave our lips.
It has been my battle-cry since I could lift a sword—I am behind you,
to my last breath.* As he spoke the serpent came.

Fire waved before it, burning his shield up to its boss; Wiglaf's armor was no good to him. He tossed his shield aside, hid under his kinsman's, refusing to leave the fight. Beowulf saw Wiglaf's gaze and struck, his entire arm behind it—and Nailing shattered, the ancient iron failed at last.

Weapons were often useless to Beowulf; his hand broke strongest steel. The fire-drake saw and rushed a third time. Fate looked at Beowulf and closed her eyes: the dragon's teeth sank into his neck; blood poured out, a red sea.

Wiglaf saw the death-blow beside him and proved what man he was. He left the head with its terrible grip alone, but struck lower—his sword-hand burning by the dragon's head—into its belly, sinking his blade until flames drew back. Beowulf came to, grabbed a knife from his corslet, and dealt the final death-blow. The dragon fell, lifeless—they had killed it together. It was Beowulf's last victory.

The dragon-bite burned, venom sinking in; Beowulf felt it finding the path to his heart. He staggered to a seat with the barrow before him, holding its silence inside. Wiglaf washed his wounds, dirt and sweat caked to his helmet, his blood-stained hands. Beowulf held a hand to his throat, struggling to speak; he knew his book of days was closing.

*I would pass this armor onto an heir, a son ready to take up his father's sword.
I have none. I ruled fifty years unchallenged—not one of our neighbors
dared risking my anger. I have stood my ground, I have kept to myself—
I have not stoked quarrels, or sworn oaths with my fingers crossed. I feel myself dying*

*and I'm glad of it—I can face God with a clear conscience and squared accounts.
The dragon lies dead—Wiglaf, show me what I have fought and died for.
Show me the treasure I leave behind, to soften the pain of my passing.*

I heard Wiglaf did as he said, laying armfuls of gold out in the sun, jewels scattering, flowers in grass, precious goblets tarnished from the dragon's careless keeping. There were rusted helmets, and arm-rings twisted with skills long since forgotten. Gold in the ground, once planted, flowers slowly at any other hand. Bright standards hung high in the hoard—they formed their own light, bouncing quick-fingered warp and weft, shining on the rest of the treasure.

There was no trace of the dragon here—their swords scooped him out of this world, and nothing mourned him. And so, as I've heard, the hoard was plundered: the cups and dishes, the standard with its impenetrable light. Beowulf's blade had done its worst, and the treasure-protector lost the nest egg he incubated in flame. Wiglaf hurried, impatient for fresh air and the sight of Beowulf, breathing. He found him, his wounds reopened. Wiglaf cleaned the blood away as Beowulf saw the gold.

*Thank God for this, thank God that I set my death warrant so high.
Wiglaf, you must watch over my people; I pay for this with my life.
I cannot stay. Build me a barrow at the headland, after the sea winds
cool my funeral fire. It will tower against the sky at Hronness
as a memorial for my people; seafarers will know it, will call it Beowulf's Barrow;
they will steer by its shadow when they come on shrouded waves.*

Beowulf took off his golden torque, told Wiglaf to take it with his helm and mailcoat, to use them well:

*You are the last of the Waegmundings now.
Fate took my kinsmen, swept every last warrior away. Now I must follow.*
Those were the last words he spoke, his body already waiting for the pyre. His breath slowed, and stopped. Beowulf's soul left his breast in glory.

Wiglaf sat, wretchedly alone, by the body. Beowulf's slayer was near, the serpent unwound in death. Iron edges had clipped his wings; he fell by the house he defended. He would not glory in flight; he fell by Beowulf's hand. Few men would hold their ground against his venomous onslaughts, or risk pilfering his barrow, for fear of finding him angry and awake. Beowulf's death had been paid for; their paths had ended here.

Not long after—though late to the fight—the warriors from the woods crept out. Ten men, clasped together like worrying, empty hands, who failed to raise their swords in defence of their own lord. They went ashamed in great shields and battle-dress to where Beowulf lay. Wiglaf sat exhausted, trying to wake him. As much as he prayed, God had decided, and Beowulf was beyond hearing.

Wiglaf had grim words for them. *Let me be blunt. Beowulf gave you treasure, the armor that you stand in. How many nights did we spend passing helms and mailcoats from his ale-bench down to us in the hall? He should have thrown that war-garb away, for all you have done with it. He didn't need us; God gave him arms enough*

*when he needed his courage. I was useless, a garnish for the dragon,
but weak as I was, I struck him, and his fire dampened. Beowulf needed us,
and in that evil moment he was almost alone.*

*You have had the last of your gifts—
no more swords and treasures, no more rights to your tracts of land.
You ran away like cowards, and every lord in the land will hear it.
The men of your family will be cast out to wander in your footsteps;
death would be better than a life like that, lived in shame.*

Wiglaf ordered Beowulf's victory brought to the men camped on the sea-cliff,
wondering if this was Beowulf's last day, if he would survive to return to them.
The man who rode to the headland bore it bravely, but he brought heavy news.

The Herald

Our ring-giver is gone. The serpent sent him to his deathbed,
but not alone: Beowulf lies with the dragon beside him,
a great knife-wound in its belly. No sword could kill it.
Wiglaf sits at Beowulf's side, a sorrowful sentry over them.

Now we wait for war—the Franks and Frisians will hear;
they have been waiting for it. Since Hygelac came to Frisia
in the prow of a war-ship, where the Hetware attacked
and brought him low—after that, no mercy comes from there.

Nor from Sweden—after Ongentheow slaughtered Haethcyn,
Hrethel's son, after the Geats attacked Scylfings in their arrogance.
Ohther's father answered quickly, cutting down the sea-king
and rescuing his wife, the mother of Onela and Ohther, long since

stripped of her gold and ornaments. He drove his enemies out
until they scrambled to Hrefnesholt without their lord. He besieged
what swordsmen were left, wounded and weary, the entire night
he shouted threats, how morning would light the insides of their bodies

cut to pieces, how they would hang off gallows-trees for birds to eat.
But at first light, their grieving found comfort. Hygelac's trumpet called
as he and his band of rescuers came to find them. The trail of blood
between us is a broad one, the wounds we cut into each other gape.

Ongentheow retreated with his kinsmen, made for higher ground;
Hygelac's fighting strength was well known, and he didn't trust
that he could fight off the seafaring warriors, or defend his wife
and children. He drew back beyond the earthen ramparts.

Hygelac came: soon enough his standard flew over the walls,
Ongentheow's refuge was overrun. He was taken, an old man brought
in a ring of swords, to Eofer—his fate was in Eofer's hands.
Wulf, Wonred's son, struck at him, so that his blood sprang out,

a red tonsure against his white hair. The old king was not afraid,
but repaid him with interest. Wulf had no return blow to give,
his helmet was cut through to hair and bone. Wulf fell bloody at that battle
but wasn't fated to die—as broken as he was, he would live.

Eofer took his place; he swung through Ongentheow's shield
to the great helm beneath it. No man could survive that blow.
Then men flew to rescue Wulf and bind his wounds, while the body
was plundered—the hard sword-hilt and helm, the corslet Eofer

brought on bent knee to Hygelac, who promised to reward him
and kept his word; once they returned home, they were granted

lands and linked rings beyond counting—and better than that,
he gave Eofer his only daughter, an honour and a blood-bond.

That is the history of our hatred, and it is why the Swedes will rejoice
as soon as they hear our lord is lifeless. When we were alone,
all our heroes fallen, he held our land against all enemies.
His deeds will be beyond telling. But even now, they come.

Now we should hurry to look at our king one last time, help him
on his way to the pyre. The gold goes with him—a grim purchase—
let it melt with his flesh. No warrior will wear this treasure as keepsake,
no beautiful maiden watch its shining jewels reflect her face.

but all of us, sorrowing, stripped of our prized possession,
must wander foreign paths now our lord has laid aside all laughter,
all gladness, all joy. Our hands will grasp for spear-shafts cold
in morning chill; no harp will resound to awaken us, but the raven,

swooping eagerly towards the stinking battlefield will tell the eagle
how it fought with wolves for our carrion, how it fared at the feast.

Witness

The man had hateful tidings, but he did not lie. The company went cheerless with welling tears, to see the last wonder of their lives. They found Beowulf lifeless, the sand cradling him. His last day had come. Next to him was the dragon, terrible in its scorched markings and stench of flame, stretching for fifty feet.

It had rejoiced in dark flight; now death held it. Vessels and flagons, wide plates and swords, lay on the earth eaten through, longing for the ground they lived in. That legacy slept spell-bound—no man could touch it unless God himself, the true giver of all victories, decided he was fit to open the hoard.

Then it was clear the treasure had come to nothing. Its guardian had killed the best of all men, settled their feud. A man, no matter how famous, never knows when his allotted life is over, when his space in the hall must be taken. Even Beowulf, facing the barrow-guardian, didn't know how his parting came.

Funeral

Men often suffer as we will, at the will of one.
As much as Beowulf loved us, he wouldn't listen
when we begged him not to attack the dragon alone,
to let it hide in its hoard until the end of the world.

The barrow stands open to all comers now. I have seen it,
strewn on the dirt, carried it overflowing in my hands.
He saw it before he died. He bids us build him a barrow
over his pyre, a monument as renowned as his kingship.

We saw the jewels a second time, wonders under the wall—
I will guide you. After we returned, we carried our king
to where he must stay. To build a pyre worthy of him,
the coast will be a fire-break until all our lives are forgotten.

Flame will draw the dark around him. I have seen him stand
under a sky grown black with arrows, enduring under shield-wall
shafts eager in flight, feathers straight behind singing barbs.
We sing his death now. We went under the hill for his werigild,

checked dark corners for the last golden scraps. No one mourned
to see those treasures plundered; none of our hands hesitated.
We pushed the dragon over the cliff, let the waves batter its body
and pull it out to sea. The gold went onto the wagon and our king,
our grey-haired warrior, went with it to Hronnesse.

The Pyre

The pyre stood ready. We hung it round with mail-coats,
battle-shields, bright helms shining back the sea.
We laid Beowulf among them, mourning our lord.
The funeral fire kindled: woodsmoke curled black
around the blaze, flames roared over our weeping
until they destroyed the bone-house, burned out his heart.

The Geat Woman

His body hidden in flames, the crackle
and puff as the center collapses—
this is when words fail, this is how they die.
My sobs, the wailing of an animal, wounded,
looking for undergrowth to hide.

What would I say? The armies will come,
captivity will stop my mouth—our lives
on a spear-point, in a merchant's purse—
long before fire's peaceful eyes turn to me.
Heaven, swallow this smoke.

The Ruin

They built a shelter on the headland,
broad and high, visible from tides upon tides out to sea.
In ten days the monument was finished. Walls stood around it;
rings and jewels were buried in the ashes. They sleep there still,
gold gone to ground, as useless to men as it ever was.

Twelve warriors rode round the burial mound, sorrowing.
They sang of Beowulf and his deeds, his nobility and bravery,
a fitting tribute for any man. The Geats mourned their lord's fall,
saying that out of all kings he was the kindest and most gracious,
the gentlest to his people; and above all things, most eager for fame.

5: Conclusion

There are two paths by which the majority of translators come to translation: the study of literature, or the study of writing. In one trajectory, a student focusses on translation as a discipline and develops her theoretical and practical sensibilities simultaneously; in the other, a creative writer branches out into translation, often without a fully theorised method of practice. They arrive at the same summit, but from drastically different routes, so it is unsurprising that the two camps disagree as vehemently as illustrated at the beginning of chapter one about what the journey was like.

This project has been a self-conscious examination of what another road might look like: a road which acknowledges both the creativity involved in any form of writing and the questions specific to translation that any translator must engage with. In fact, this road has turned out to be just one, focused on translation as a creative act in particular, of a proliferation of paths; viewing translation as a cluster concept allows each translator to focus on the details of her particular journey while acknowledging that there are many other ways to get from Source Text A to Target Text B. The experience of that process has involved interrogating perhaps more intensively than would be done otherwise the reasons behind a writer's decision to translate, and why *Beowulf* is an appealing source text in particular. Its background includes several attractive aspects: it is a poem steeped in historical and cultural mores, its status within English-language poetry raises several issues about our relationship (both personal and political) to language, and its delayed entrance into translation links it explicitly to hypotheses about why and how writers translate. As discussed in chapter two, *Beowulf* demands a prospective translator decide her approach to issues of background cultural and historical knowledge, as well as how to approach translating a source text whose poetic forms and meters are drastically different from modern English poetics. Chapter three explored how those questions might be resolved, and were resolved in this particular case: by a strategy of multiplying narrative voices within the poem as a way of presenting different viewpoints and opinions, none of which are prioritised over the others. The final translation presents the reader with voices numerous enough to suggest that no one version of the *Beowulf* story could give a complete (or completely truthful) telling of it. The translation's title itself, *Beowulf: a translation*, indicates this strategy from the outset, thereby advertising to

the potential reader what the translation expects of its audience, and what its reader may expect in turn of the text.

In order for this alternate path to translation to be valuable to anyone besides the actual translator, however, it would be helpful to understand more explicitly how this translation is related to creative writing. To do that, it is useful to briefly return to “Brownout,” the original poem discussed in chapter one:

Brownout

By ten pm the temperature has dropped to ninety-three degrees.
Part of the city raises its head into a quiet second life: older cars,
their batteries and radiators throttled into stalling in the afternoon heat,

will turn over this late. Drive-through lanes and Cost-U-Less carparks
fill up. The late-shift stockboys, refilling rows of gallon milk cartons,
sit back on their heels and watch their work disappear into shopping carts

and out the door. Sprinklers are screwed onto hoses and turned on
in darkness that lets the water sink—in the press of the afternoon,
the water evaporates before it sinks into the hard-packed dirt of the lawn.

An old woman lies on a sheet-covered couch with her body in bloom,
blood hovering just below her skin like petals pausing, gaining strength,
waiting to open. Her rattling, sweaty breaths dissipate like perfume

lifting off a body. In the shopping mall, a single bat laps the length
of the building, above the grilles holding the storefronts closed,
alone with the overchilled air, settling into the night and his own wind.

The introduction was mainly concerned with how this poem was originally conceived: the origins of the poem, the decision on a narrative voice, and the relationship between personal experience and outside influences. Only briefly touched upon was the actual construction of the poem: namely, the choice to write it as a terza rima. The poem began as a few initial exploratory lines, and once a chance rhyme was noticed, the form was settled on almost immediately. “Brownout” was written from partway into a first draft as a terza rima, and thus the entire poem is linked to that particular form as a constraint.

Compare that experience to a first draft of “Buildings,” the portion of this translation describing the construction of Heorot and Grendel's first exposure to it:

Buildings

Hrothgar built success in battles,
honed his voice to be obeyed—
a sword-edge, a line on a map—
a voice to be followed. His company
turned into a band, into a battalion,
into a hall. His mind turned to it:
the greatest hall we would ever learn of
(the margins still smouldering,
licking at the cross-hatches of *Heorot*).
The greatest hall for gift-giving—
Hrothgar's Christmas special,
how the women in the audience scream!
No, that's not right—back, back,
swilling ale and golden throat-rings,
you know this bit. This sounds right.

Then I heard orders go out
across this middle-earth, to adorn
this dwelling. The roof towered:
it was ready. He created its name,
Heorot, the eaves branching into points
of wooden horns, brandished.
He said it, and it was done—treasures given
at his banquets, gold eating its own tail.
The hall towered up, wide-gabled,
swallowing the sound, waiting for the surge
of flames that must come, that will come,
that came: the demon waited miserable,
out in the darkness, hearing rejoicing
from the mouth of the hall. There was harping,
a poet's clear song to the night:

*Who made this hall we stand in?
Who made the earth we tamp beneath our feet?
Who made the sun and the moon, who made
what they illuminate?
And who knows enough to call them
what they are? Who knows the score?*

The demon marked this;
the demon endured.

The final version, quoted below, has changed in form rather drastically:

Buildings

Hrothgar built success in battles, honed his voice to be obeyed,
a sword-edge, a line on a map
a voice to be followed. His company turned into a band, a battalion,
a hall. His mind turned to it: the greatest hall we would ever hear of,
margins still smoldering, licking at the cross-hatches
the greatest hall for gift-giving,
the greatest hall.

The orders went out across his portion of the earth,
to adorn the dwelling. And early in Hrothgar's time, the roof towered:
it was ready. He named it, Heorot, a brandishing of roof-beams,
eaves arcing out into points of wooden horns.
He said it, and it was done. The fires inside, the feasting,
the treasures given out, gold eating its own tail.
The wide-gabled hall swallowed the sound, waiting for the surge
of flames that must come, that will come,
that came: the demon waited miserable in the darkness,
laughter spitting out from the mouth of the hall.
Guts of a harp were pulled, a poet's clear song to the night:

*Who made this hall we stand in?
Who made the earth we tamp beneath our feet?
Who made the sun and the moon?
Who made what they illuminate?
And who knows enough to call them
what they are? Who knows the score?*

The demon watched this;
the demon waited.

There are a few changes of wording from one draft to the next—the ending words of the poem, a deletion of modern colloquialisms in the first stanza—but large portions of each draft are identical to one another. By far the most significant alteration between drafts is in the rhythm of the line-breaks, which drastically changes how the poem is read. The first draft has a short, stomping rhythm, mimicking both the Old English source text and the repetitive swing of a hammer: the poem sounds as if it is being constructed. This approach is abandoned in the final

draft, which has lengthened many of the lines, condensed the narrative of the story, and moved the focus of the poem to the different voices interjecting themselves into the piece. That change only occurred in the penultimate draft; “Buildings” remained in its earlier form for months before being redrafted into a very different poem.

A similar process of redrafting and reforming a translation took place in Unferth's introduction to the poem. Unferth doesn't like Beowulf, and expresses that dislike by bringing up an earlier exploit of which he disapproves:

Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son
sat at the feet of the lord of the Scyldings,
let loose his hostile hidden thoughts.
He was vexed by Beowulf's bravery,
since he didn't want any other man under heaven
to have more glory than himself.
“Are you the Beowulf who struggled with Breca,
competing in swimming the wide sea,
trying the water on a boast and risking your lives?
Not for any money could friend nor foe dissuade you
from your sorry venture, when you both swam in the sea;
there you both embraced the ocean's stream,
measuring its street, gliding through the ocean.
The deep waves surged, winter's whirl;
you both toiled seven nights in its power;
he beat you at swimming, was the stronger man;
He washed up in the morning tide
on the land of the Heatho-Rams,
made his way back to the Bronding people.
He truly carried out his boast.
Therefore I expect the worst of you,
no matter what other outcomes were good,
if you dare to wait the night for Grendel.

This draft lacks much of any form whatsoever. It uses awkward syntax and often antiquated language, as well as uneven meter and line-length. It is less free verse and more nebulous verse, and was almost immediately edited into the very different translation draft below.

Unferth, Ecglaf's son, sat at Hrothgar's feet. He wasn't impressed by Beowulf, because no one was impressed by him. “Are you the Beowulf who fought with Breca in a swimming competition, who risked your lives and your people's futures on a boast? No one could dissuade you, but in you plopped, splashing through winter's whirl like your personal bathtub

for seven long nights—not caring what happened on land. I heard Breca beat you,
that he alone made it back; you washed up somewhere like the corpse
of a sea-exhausted squid, like a child waving for the lifeguard.
If you can't get the best of water"—he drained his glass—"I fear Grendel
may be too high a proof for you, if you insist on waiting for him."

Already there are significant changes—perhaps most notably in the change to the swimmer who was washed up on a coast. In the source text, Unferth describes Breca as having made landfall in another territory, then making his way home. This draft instead describes Beowulf as washing up on an unnamed coast; a dramatic change—and one that could perhaps be taken as a translating error—but one which emphasises Unferth's point that Beowulf lost the contest. On a more formal level, the lines have lengthened and become much more even, and the language includes more play with informal registers. Subsequent editing transformed this section to its final incarnation:

Hey—aren't you the Beowulf who swam with Breca,
the two of you risking your lives and your people's futures
on a bet? I heard your women cried on the cliff-top
trying to stop you, your peasants looked at their fields
left open and unfenced to the borders, and prayed.

But you couldn't be held back, paddling through winter's whelm
for seven nights, bravest and best leaders of men!
I heard Breca beat you, that you washed up on the wrong coast
limp and near-lifeless, tossed with the rest of the refuse
the sea tired of holding. If you can't even best water, (*he drains*
his glass) I fear you may find Grendel too high a proof.

In this iteration, the poem begins in Unferth's voice, although draws the reader's attention to the fact that a story is being told with the stage-direction description of "he drains/ his glass" in the last stanza. The form of the poem has changed once again, to slightly shorter lines broken up into two stanzas.

The part of the editing process most salient to this discussion is how drastically each translation changes in form from one draft to another. When compared to "Brownout," in which the form is set almost immediately, these drafts might appear indecisive. This is not the case—instead, these drafts are of a poem whose narrative arc is set. "Brownout" had a set form quite early in the process, and it was instead the narrative that changed, as the title—referring to an event later removed from the poem—can attest. In the composition of each poem, one constraint is chosen

almost immediately—in the case of the translation, chosen before the poem is even begun—while another aspect of the poem alters drastically from one draft to another. Boase-Beier argues that constraint “empowers the creative act because it is in the interplay between given extra- and intratextual constraint and individual freedom that creativity develops” (Boase-Beier 2006b: 47, Boase-Beier & Holman 1999); she also explicitly makes the link between the kind of constraints imposed upon him- or herself by an author writing original work and the constraints imposed by the presence of a source text. Any form of writing by definition will involve making decisions which limit certain aspects of the work that will be produced; to translate is merely to make the limits imposed by the source text a more explicit part of the artistic process than it might be otherwise. Furthermore, to view translation as a way of writing creatively in which certain constraints are prioritised above others allows all forms of translation to be considered under the same metric: Michael Alexander's translation of *Beowulf* uses the structure of the source text as its most prominent constraint, while Raymond Oliver has chosen to use the narrative arc as his main constraint and work more creatively with the descriptive passages of the poem (Niles 1993).

The field of translation is filled with many *scops*, each declaiming his or her own view on the creative process. Small wonder that the cacophony occasionally erupts into a dragon's roar that threatens to crisp the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. To view translation as a type of writing—and specifically a type of writing focussed more explicitly on choosing constraints deliberately placed into the writing process—allows each of those voices to be honoured as an individual approach to what is overall the same creative process. For after all, Beowulf's dragon was not killed by Beowulf alone: although some of his followers fled, afraid of the battle, he was joined by a young warrior who helped him bear his shield. Each new translation raises a new dragon, perhaps under a different appearance, perhaps breathing a flame that demands a new approach to the fight. Each dragon exists—and more importantly, so does each new hero. Even if the dragon falls in a way previously unseen, we can rejoice in the familiar action of pushing it out to the sea, as a poet tells the story of how it happened. Listen. You haven't heard this one before.

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