

= On Translating Beowulf =

" On Translating Beowulf " is an essay by J. R. R. Tolkien which discusses the difficulties faced by anyone attempting to translate the Old English heroic @-@ elegiac poem Beowulf into modern English . It was first published in 1940 as a preface contributed by Tolkien to a translation of Old English poetry ; it was first published as an essay under its current name in the 1983 collection *The Monsters and the Critics , and Other Essays* .

In the essay , Tolkien explains the difficulty of translating individual words from Old English , noting that a word like *eacen* ( ' large ' , ' strong ' , ' supernaturally powerful ' ) cannot readily be translated by the same word in each case . He notes the problem of translating poetic kennings such as *sundwudu* ( ' flood @-@ timber ' , i.e. ' ship ' ) and that the language chosen by the poet was already archaic at that moment . He explains that such terms had echoes and connotations of another world , an " unrecapturable magic " .

The essay describes Old English metre , with each line in two opposed halves . The stressed syllables in each half contained alliterating sounds in six possible patterns , which Tolkien illustrates using modern English . Rhyme is used only for special effects , such as to imitate waves beating on a shore . The essay ends with the observation that the whole poem is itself in two opposed halves , covering " Youth + Age ; he rose ? fell . "

Critics note that Tolkien attempted and sometimes failed to follow the rules he laid down in the essay in his own alliterative verse , in his own translations , and indeed in his narrative fiction such as *Lord of the Rings* .

= = Literary context = =

J.R.R. Tolkien contributed " On Translating Beowulf " as a preface entitled " Prefatory Remarks on Prose Translation of ' Beowulf ' " to the 1940 edition of C.L. Wrenn 's book *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment , A Translation into Modern English Prose* , which had first been published in 1911 by John R. Clark Hall . Tolkien , the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo @-@ Saxon at the University of Oxford , had himself attempted a prose translation of Beowulf , but abandoned it , dissatisfied ; it was published posthumously , edited by his son Christopher Tolkien as *Beowulf : A Translation and Commentary* in 2014 .

The preface was published under the title " On Translating Beowulf " in 1983 ( and in subsequent editions ) , as one of the essays in *The Monsters and the Critics , and Other Essays* , also edited by Christopher Tolkien .

= = Essay = =

The essay is divided into the following sections ( which are arranged hierarchically but not numbered in the original ) :

= = = On Translation and Words = = =

Tolkien comments on the risk of using a translation as a substitute for study with grammar and dictionary , calling it an abuse , and writing that

On the strength of a nodding acquaintance of this sort ( it may be supposed ) , one famous critic informed his public that Beowulf was ' only small beer ' . Yet if beer at all , it is a drink dark and bitter : a solemn funeral @-@ ale with the taste of death .

He notes that a readable translation cannot always translate an Old English ( OE ) word the same way ; thus *eacen* is rendered ' stalwart ' , ' broad ' , ' huge ' , and ' mighty ' , correctly in each case to fit the context , but losing the clue to the word 's special meaning , " not ' large ' but ' enlarged ' " . The word implies , in fact , supernatural or superhuman power , like Beowulf 's gift from God of " thirtyfold strength " . And this is just an example , Tolkien points out , of a minor challenge to the translator .

A second issue ( in his view ) is the compactness of Old English words , which often have no modern equivalents , and phrases which are " inevitably weakened even in prose by transference to our looser modern language " .

Another problem is posed by the kennings , which Tolkien calls " poetical devices , ... descriptive compounds " . He gives the example of *sundwudu* ( ' flood @-@ timber ' ) for ' ship ' ; some phrase like ' wave @-@ borne timbers ' is " an attempt to unfold , at the risk of dissipating it , the briefly flashed picture " .

Tolkien mocks " oddities " like " ten timorous trothbreakers together " ( for *Beowulf* line 2846 , in Clark Hall 's unrevised version ) as " reminiscent of the ' two tired toads that tried to trot to Tutbury ' " . He does not approve , either , of choosing needlessly colloquial words : " Too often notables , visitors and subalterns appeared instead of the more fitting , and indeed more literally accurate , counsellors , strangers , and young knights . "

Further , he points out that the language used by the *Beowulf* poet was already archaic , and the choice of words was at the time recognisably poetic . Tolkien gives as an example *beorn* , which meant both ' bear ' and ' warrior ' , but only in heroic poetry could it be used to mean ' man ' . He advises the translator to prefer ' striking ' and ' smiting ' , and to avoid " hitting and whacking " . But on the other hand , he criticises William Morris for using the dead and unintelligible ' *leeds* ' for OE *leode* ( ' freemen ' , ' people ' ; cf German *leute* ) , even if antiquarians feel that the word ought to have survived . Tolkien does not accept the etymological fallacy either : *mod* means ' pride ' , not ' mood ' ; *burg* is ' stronghold ' , not ' borough ' , even though the modern word derives from the old one .

Some terms present special problems ; the *Beowulf* poet uses at least ten synonyms for the word ' man ' , from *wer* ( as in *werewolf* , a man @-@ wolf ) and *beorn* to *leod* and *mann* ; Tolkien writes that in heroic verse there were over 25 terms that could at a stretch be used to mean ' man ' , including words like *eorl* ( a nobleman , like ' earl ' ) ; *cniht* ( a young man , like ' knight ' ) ; *ðegn* ( a servant , like *thain* ) ; or *wiga* ( a warrior ) . He argues that the translator need not avoid words from the Middle Ages that might suggest the age of chivalry : better the world of King Arthur than " Red Indians " , and in the case of words for armour and weapons , there is no choice .

In the case of compound words , Tolkien observes that the translator has to hesitate between simply naming the thing denoted ( so ' harp ' 1065 , for *gomen @-@ wudu* ' play @-@ wood ' ) , and resolving the combination into a phrase . The former method retains the compactness of the original but loses its colour ; the latter retains the colour , but even if it does not falsify or exaggerate it , it loosens and weakens the texture . Choice between the evils will vary with occasions . "

Tolkien concludes the section by warning the translator that even the most well @-@ worn kennings had not lost their meaning and connotations . Whereas , he argues , the Old English word *hlaford* , meaning ' lord ' ( which derives from it ) was all that was left of the antique *hlafweard* ( which originally meant ' bread @-@ keeper ' , ' loaf @-@ guard ' ) in daily speech , the poetic phrases used in verse retained echoes of another world :

He who in those days said and who heard *flæschama* ' flesh @-@ raiment ' , *ban @-@ hus* ' bone @-@ house ' , *hreðer @-@ loca* ' heart @-@ prison ' , thought of the soul shut in the body , as the frail body itself is trammelled in armour , or as a bird in a narrow cage , or steam pent in a cauldron . ... The poet who spoke these words saw in his thought the brave men of old walking under the vault of heaven upon the island earth [ *middangeard* ] beleaguered by the Shoreless Seas [ *garsecg* ] and the outer darkness , enduring with stern courage the brief days of life [ *læne lif* ] , until the hour of fate [ *metodsceaft* ] when all things should perish , *leoht* and *lif samod* . But he did not say all this fully or explicitly . And therein lies the unrecapturable magic of ancient English verse for those who have ears to hear : profound feeling , and poignant vision , filled with the beauty and mortality of the world , are aroused by brief phrases , light touches , short words resounding like harp @-@ strings sharply plucked .

== = On Metre == =

Tolkien states that he is going to give an account of Old English metre using modern English , bringing out " the ancestral kinship of the two languages , as well as the differences between them "

#### ===== Metre =====

Tolkien explains that each line of Old English poetry had two opposed halves , groups of words which had six possible patterns of stress , such as ' falling @-@ falling ' , like  
kníghts in | ármour .

4 ..... 1 4 .... 1

where 4 means a full lift ( maximum stress ) and 1 is the lowest dip in stress .

A clashing pattern would be like

on hígh | móuntains .

1 ..... 4 4 ..... 1

Tolkien emphasises that these are still the patterns found everywhere in modern English ; poetry differs from prose , he argues , in that the poet clears away everything else , so " these patterns stand opposed to each other . "

He then provides " a free version of Beowulf 210 @-@ 228 in this metre . The passage should be read slowly , but naturally : that is with the stresses and tones required solely by the sense . " The first few lines , which as Tolkien says are a free ( non @-@ literal ) translation of the Old English , run :

#### ===== Variations =====

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

#### ===== Alliteration =====

Tolkien states that calling Old English verse alliterative is a misnomer for two reasons . Firstly it is not fundamental to the metre , which would work without it . Secondly , it does not depend on letters , as in modern English alliteration , but on sounds . Old English alliteration , then , is an " agreement of the stressed elements in beginning with the same consonant , or in beginning with no consonant . " Further , all words starting with any stressed vowel are considered to alliterate : he gives the example of ' old ' alliterating with ' eager ' .

#### ===== Arrangement =====

Tolkien lays down three rules of Old English alliteration . " One full lift in each half @-@ line must alliterate . " In the second half @-@ line , only the first lift may alliterate : the second must not . In the first half @-@ line , both lifts can alliterate ; the stronger one must do so . He notes that these rules force the second half @-@ line to have its stronger lift first , so lines tend to fall away at the end , contrasting with a " rise in intensity " at the start of the next line .

#### ===== Function =====

Tolkien states that " The main metrical function of alliteration is to link the two separate and balanced patterns together into a complete line " , so it has to be as early in the second half @-@ line as possible . It also quickens and relieves heavy patterns ( which had double alliteration ) .

Rhyme is used only " gratuitously , and for special effects . " Here he gives an example from

Beowulf itself , lines 212 @-@ 213 : ' stréamas wundon | | sund wið sande ' ( waves wound | | sea against sand ) , where ' wundon ' actually rhymes ( internally ) with ' sund ' . Tolkien explains : " [ here ] the special effect ( breakers are beating on the shore ) may be regarded as deliberate . " His version of this captures the rhyme and the alliteration , as well as the meaning :

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

He also notes that sentences generally stop in the middle of a line , so " sense @-@ break and metrical break are usually opposed . " He notes too that significant elements in second half @-@ lines are often " caught up and re @-@ echoed or elaborated " , giving a characteristic ' parallelism ' to Beowulf . This is seen , he argues , not just in such small details , but in the parallel arrangement of narrative , descriptive and speech passages ; in the use of separate passages describing incidents of strife between Swedes and Geats ; and at the largest scale , in the fact that the whole poem

itself is like a line of its own verse written large , a balance of two great blocks , A + B ; or like two of its parallel sentences with a single subject but no expressed conjunction . Youth + Age ; he rose ? fell . It may not be , at large or in detail , fluid or musical , but it is strong to stand : tough builder 's work of true stone .

= = Reception = =

Mark F. Hall , examining Tolkien 's own use of alliterative verse , writes that Tolkien notes that " the Beowulf poet likely was consciously using archaic and literary words " , and compares this to Tolkien 's own practice in poems such as " The Lay of the Children of Húrin " , where , Hall thinks , Tolkien 's words could be applied to his own verse : " Its manner and conventions , and its metre , are unlike those of modern English verse . Also it is preserved fragmentarily and by chance , and has only in recent times been redéciphered and interpreted , without the aid of any tradition or gloss " . Hall further comments that in ' Lays of Beleriand ' , Tolkien failed to heed his own warning against archaism , as he uses the word " weird " archaically to mean ' fate ' ( OE ' wyrd ' ) , and speculates that this may have been a reaction against the " rigidity and formality of translating authentic Anglo @-@ Saxon literature . "

The Green Man Review comments that Tolkien 's " emphasis as a translator was on selecting the word that best fit the tone of the poem . He defends the Beowulf poet 's use of high sounding language that was anachronistic even in [ the poet 's ] time . He also uses the works of earlier translators of Beowulf to give hilarious examples of what to avoid when translating an ancient text . " The reviewer concludes that together with " The Monsters and the Critics " , the essays are " strangely prescient . With a little tweaking , they could easily serve as a defense of The Lord of the Rings against charges that its high sounding language was at variance with the ' juvenile ' plot . "

The fantasy and science fiction author Alexa Chipman writes that while Tolkien was " firmly against any prose translation of Beowulf , as it is , at heart , a poem " , he agreed that " if one is trying to read the original , having a translation of it handy can sometimes be of assistance " . She recalls her own Beowulf studies with " a huge stack of dictionary and grammar books " , and draws attention to Tolkien 's comment that " Perhaps the most important function of any translation used by a student is to provide not a model for imitation , but an exercise for correction . "

The same comment , on the function of any translation , is cited by Hugh Magennis in his book Translating Beowulf : Modern Versions in English Verse , along with Tolkien 's opening remark that translating a poem into " plain prose " , " a work of skilled and close @-@ wrought metre ( to say no more ) needs defence . " Magennis writes that Tolkien " goes on to provide such a defence " by insisting that " Clark Hall " was offered not to enable people to judge the original poem or to substitute for it , but " to provide an aid to study . " He also cites Tolkien 's insistence that " the Modern English of prose Beowulf translations should be ' harmonious ' and should avoid ' colloquialism and false modernity ' . " Magennis argues that

This conviction provides the rationale for an elevated register incorporating archaizing features , such as he finds in Wrenn 's ' Clark Hall ' : ' If you wish to translate , not rewrite Beowulf ' , declares Tolkien , ' your language must be literary and traditional : not because it is now a long while since the poem was made , or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient ; but because the diction of Beowulf was poetical , archaic , artificial ( if you will ) , in the day that the poem was made . ' Here Tolkien does argue for literary correspondence between source and translation : the translation is doing more than conveying ( to revert to an earlier quotation from Tolkien ) ' the matter of the poem , and furnishing the professional student with the material and guidance necessary for the early stages of his study of the original ' ; it is doing so in an appropriate style that suggests qualities of the Old English .

The academic Philip Mitchell comments that " The entire essay is worth serious study " and notes that among other points made by Tolkien , " Anglo @-@ Saxon verse is not attempting to offer puzzles but an aesthetic of compression in a slow meter of balance . "

In his thesis , Peter Grybauskas writes that Tolkien is preoccupied with " structural juxtapositions " in " Beowulf : The Monsters and the Critics " and " On Translating Beowulf " . In these essays , Grybauskas argues , Tolkien talks about concepts of balance and opposition , and indeed ends the essay on translation with a synecdoche , a " structural vision of the whole capable of being glimpsed in the smallest part " in the passage ( quoted above ) where Tolkien talks about the " two great blocks , A + B " . He points out that Tolkien makes use of the concept in the composition of his fictional work The Lord of the Rings .

The translator Ross Smith comments that while Tolkien was cautious about publishing his translations of Beowulf , " he was quite willing to explain the approach that in his opinion should be taken towards such a monolithic task . " Smith points out that , unlike publishing a prose or verse translation , explaining his translation criteria did not expose Tolkien to aesthetic criticism . Smith remarks that Tolkien is " somewhat disdainful " of Clark Hall 's version , such things being useful as study @-@ guides and little else ; putting Old English poetry into modern English prose inevitably creates something " dull and flat " , so Tolkien much prefers versions that try to preserve the original 's rhyme and metre . Smith notes that the same opinion can be found in Tolkien 's essay " Sir Gawain and the Green Knight " .