REVIEW ESSAY

Translating *Beowulf* for our Times

Caroline Batten and Charles Tolkien-Gillett

Beowulf: In Blank Verse. Translated by Richard Hamer. Pp. xvii + 142. London: Faber and Faber, 2020. Hb. £14.99.

Beowulf: A Verse Translation. Translated by J. G. Nichols. Pp. 213. London: Alma Books, 2019. Pb. £7.99.

Beowulf: A Translation and A Reading. Translated by Chris McCully. Pp. 208. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2018. Pb. £14.99

Beowulf: A New Translation. Translated by Maria Dahvana Headley. Pp. xxxvii + 138. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. Pb. £9.99.

'Why does anyone need another translation of *Beowulf*?' Richard Hamer asks at the beginning of his *Beowulf: In Blank Verse* (2020). Hamer does not quite answer his own question, but it is a reasonable one because few long poems have been translated as often – by scholars, amateurs, and working poets, in verse and in prose, laden with archaisms or updated with contemporary diction, mimicking the features of Old English poetry or eschewing them altogether. These 3,000 lines of alliterative verse, most likely composed somewhere in midland England in the eighth century, have perhaps attracted so many translators because, more than a millennium later, the poem remains both narratively vivid and essentially enigmatic. It is a story of the death of kings in sixth-century Scandinavia – a tragedy of dynastic discontinuity bookended by two funerals – and of a hero who battles three monsters and is slain by the last. Yet the text refuses to yield all its secrets to the reader even after long study. *Beowulf* was not written for us, and that fact is apparent from its first word (*hwæt*, for which there is no satisfactory modern English

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equivalent). There are cruces that have never been solved, lines whose meaning is hotly debated. Its moral core is elusive: scholars still do not agree on whether the poem passes judgement on Beowulf for fighting the dragon alone; whether Beowulf is a 'successful' warrior and king; whether the audience is meant to feel sympathy for Grendel and his mother, who are sometimes described as monsters and sometimes as humans, suffering the pain of exile and exclusion.

Though a much longer translation history is provided in Hugh Magennis' magisterial *Translating Beowulf: Modern Versions in English Verse* (2011), the *Beowulf* most readers will think of first is Seamus Heaney's 1999 translation. Heaney's text, which brought Ulster speech habits and the poet's particular aesthetic to bear on an ancient poem, firmly established *Beowulf* in translation as being suitable for public consumption, outside the confines of the academy. All translations published since are, in some ways, born in its shadow, and must reckon with its legacy. Given that the poem has been translated so often, and for so long, new renderings of *Beowulf* are faced with the need to justify themselves. Four new translations were published in the years 2018–20 that offer different answers to Hamer's question, including Hamer's own. Magennis asserts in *Translating Beowulf* that good translations 'convey a sense of the poetry of that original, though inevitably transforming the poem in the process as all translations necessarily do'. Each of these translators prioritizes different aspects of the original, reminding us that each new translation of *Beowulf* sheds light on a different facet of an often elusive poem.

Hamer's name will be familiar to many who have studied Old English literature at university in the past forty years. His 1970 *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (revised and expanded for Faber in 2015) has been a trusty companion to scholars for decades. It won acclaim for, among other things, compiling and making more accessible many of the shorter poems from the surviving corpus of early medieval English poetry. As Hamer translated *Beowulf*'s 'Finnsburh Episode' for his revised collection, his 2020 stand-alone *Beowulf* does not represent a 'return' to translation, but rather the gradual assembly of a corpus, and the gradual refinement of his craft.

Hamer's positioning of his translation as an independent work is perhaps signalled by the paratextual departures his *Beowulf* makes from *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*: an absence of line numbers and no provision of an Old English facing text. Unusually, Hamer divides the poem into chapter-like sections, more or less following the fitt divisions present in the manuscript. He also prefaces each segment with a brief description of what occurs in each section. Most of these headings are banal, as when

'Hrothgar replies at length'. At other times they veer close to predetermining one's reading of the text. Hamer writes, for example, that Wealhtheow speaks 'disingenuously' about Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf in her complex peacemaking speech delivered at the Danes' celebratory feast. Regardless of whether this is a valid description of the queen's speech, it colours the reader's approach to the passage. At other moments these titles are not so much dirigiste as deflating, announcing each death the moment before it occurs: 'Wiglaf brings out treasures and attends to Beowulf, who gives instructions for his funeral and dies.' In an edition of a 1,000-year-old poem, this can scarcely be called 'spoiling' the story, but such chapter headings may be in tension with Hamer's stated goal of inspiring new audiences. It is like a version of *Hamlet* that announces ahead of the final scene: 'A quarrel ensues. All perish, save Horatio and Fortinbras.' A large part of the poem's ability to surprise is lost.

Hamer is intellectually and artistically committed to blank verse, as his title makes plain, and defends his choice at length in his Introduction. Deeply conscious of previous criticism of the use of blank verse for translating *Beowulf* – Edwin Morgan, Gavin Bone, and Hugh Magennis have all argued that this metre classicizes the early medieval text too much – Hamer claims to avoid archaism and produce 'more fluent use of the verse form' while averring the neutrality of blank verse. While Hamer largely avoids deliberate archaism in his diction and through his contemporized spellings (note, however, that Unferth's sword is 'damascened' and Ongentheow is 'the agèd Shilfing'), a line such as 'The hero bade Unferth, the son of Edgelaf, | To take possession of his sword again' can only be from an 'agèd' poem, or one which wishes to sound old. The fact remains, too, that blank verse *does* have a smoothing effect on Old English verse: the long poetic lines string together the short, often self-contained phrases of Old English half-lines, and Hamer's stately language is sometimes removed from the strangeness and vividness of the original. Hrothgar's messenger informs his king that Beowulf and his warriors 'have requested that they may have speech | With you, my lord; I pray you, gracious Hrothgar, | That you do not deny them what they ask', lines which would be more at home in Shakespeare than the work of an eighth-century Mercian.

Yet Hamer's translation is always clear and readable, moving with a steady pace and remaining close to the meanings of the Old English words. The subtle refinement of his style as a translator can be seen when comparing his 2015 *Finnsburh Episode* to his 2020 *Beowulf*. Very little changes in this passage: 'Music and song were both then heard in turn' replaces 'There were both song and music heard in turn.' Hnaf the

Shilding is no longer 'cut down' but 'struck down', and so (to avoid repetition) where two lines earlier fate 'struck' it now 'fell'. 'Man' for *mon* becomes, more correctly, 'one', and Finn no longer 'thought of his country' but 'yearned for his homeland'. None of these adjustments fundamentally affect Hamer's reading of *Beowulf*, but they do reflect a continued attention to language. At the end of the Finnsburh Episode, these lines reflect something else:

> The lay was sung, the minstrel's tale was ended.
> The revelry resumed, and sounds of joy
> Rose loudly from the benches.

Here the shape of Old English half-lines lingers in the first line's asyndetic parataxis. Then the 'sounds of joy', were it not for the preceding syndetic 'and', could easily be read as a variation of 'revelry' – echoing the Old English poetic practice of variation, or artful restatement without clear syntactic coordination – though the noun phrase continues as the subject of the following line. Such moments, along with Hamer's opportunistic use of alliteration, enhance the experience of reading the poem in English. Yet Hamer's investment in what he calls the 'certain but not excessive dignity and formality' of blank verse means that his *Beowulf* necessarily keeps the original at arm's length, preventing us from accessing the rhythm or syntax of the Old English through this work. However, many readers will find that its clarity and economy of language make it readable on its own as well as alongside a standard edition of *Beowulf*.

J. G. Nichols' compact *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, by contrast, offers little discussion of translation. The edition provides no information on our translator – other than the description on the back cover, which tells us only that he is 'multi-award winning' – or his approach and objectives in translating. This unusual reticence, combined with the dual (but not parallel) Old English text provided, suggests that Nichols' work is meant to be read as an extension of the Old English poem itself, setting to one side questions of the independence of a translation from its original. The Old English text is taken directly from the standard fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, complete with Robert Bjork, R. D. Fulk, and John D. Niles' brackets, italicizations, and other editorial notations, for which no notes are provided.

Nichols, whose highly praised translations from Italian include a *Divine Comedy* (reviewed in *T&L* Vol. 23, 2014), Leopardi (*T&L* 6, 1997), and Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (*T&L* 14, 2005), has stayed fairly faithful to the meanings of the Old English words and often to the syntax of the original, in many places translating half-line by half-line. Nichols does not

offer formal or stylistic innovation in his modern English, but as a result the translation will feel familiar to anyone who has read other works in this crowded field. He is, however, particularly interested in Old English kennings, compound words that can be described as miniature riddles, consisting of a genitive construction of two or more nouns which combine to offer a creative metaphor for an everyday object. With a compound like *merehrægla* ('mere-garment'), translators have two principal options: give the word in Modern English that 'solves' the kenning ('sail') or provide their own compound noun or genitive construction ('sea-garment' or 'garment of the sea'). Nichols often combines both – offering in this instance 'sail, a strange sea garment'. He is slightly over-keen to identify kennings in the text, identifying the noun phrase 'ringèd prow' as one such despite the fact that the phrase has no similative quality and simply describes the front of a ship.

Indeed, this translation often seems to get caught up in the strangeness that certain features of Old English have for contemporary readers. The text is laden with archaisms – 'ween', 'sooth', 'weeds' (for 'garments'), 'whilere', 'forthwith' – and the Scotticisms that often appear in translations of Old English (e.g. 'bairn'). *Ligdraca* ('evil-dragon') and *fyrdraca* ('fire-dragon') are both given as 'fire-drake'. While the archaic 'firedrake' does have some resonance as a word for 'dragon', and persists in popular medievalism and fantasy literature, the word may also, less appropriately, suggest to a modern reader a flaming duck.

A section labelled 'Extra Material', which includes Nichols' discussion of kennings, also offers a broad history of the poem's fortunes and some commentary on its contents. This material includes generalizations about early medieval England and Old English verse that suggest an unfamiliarity with certain contentious issues in Old English scholarship, or the complexities behind such fleeting claims as '[The character Beowulf] is surrounded by allusions to Germanic heroes and incidents which we know to be historical' (p. 209). Nichols at one point also suggests that contributions to *Beowulf* studies from scholars outside Germany and Scandinavia are a new phenomenon, a statement that has not been true since the nineteenth century.

Whereas Nichols' tidy edition does not allow much discussion of the issues that arise when translating a poem over a millennium old, such questions come to the fore in Chris McCully's *Beowulf: A Translation and A Reading*. McCully's *Beowulf* has a clear purpose, seeking to translate not just content but essential elements of form. He is successful in achieving a particular poetic goal: all the half-lines in his translation follow the restricted patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables allowed in Old English verse. This is no mean feat, but his translation raises the question

of whether rhythmical faithfulness is always conducive to readability, or to capturing tone and spirit.

McCully translates *Beowulf* using the half- and long-line structures found in the original, and adheres to the basic rhythmic patterns in Old English verse, known as the 'Five Types' first put forward by philologist Eduard Sievers. Each half-line has four metrical positions arranged in a limited number of ways: these include trochaic and iambic patterns as well as clashing and falling patterns no longer common in English verse. Such rhythms are difficult to render in modern English, and McCully achieves commendable consistency throughout. In many places, his verse is crisp and propulsive, as in his description of the aged Beowulf preparing to battle the dragon:

> Up he straightened, stern-faced, renowned,
> helmeted, war-ready; walked in battle-gear
> toward the stone cliff-face. He trusted his strength
> in single combat. That was no coward's way.

McCully's use of compounds here ('war-ready', 'battle-gear', 'cliff-face') allows him to replicate the falling stress patterns of these lines in modern diction. At its best, McCully's translation is clear and readable, hitting the beats of Old English metre, and offering punchy phrases like 'big-noised Beowulf'.

Yet the enterprise is a difficult one. The 'five types' of rhythmical arrangement may suit Old English, a language with regular stress patterns, short words that are easily compounded, and flexible word order, but modern English is not nearly so amenable to clashing and falling stress patterns. Old English verse also adheres to strict alliterative patterns, which McCully often replicates – again, a notable achievement – but which he cannot consistently maintain. (Scholars may bristle at the resulting implication that 'Old English metre' is a matter of rhythm alone, with alliteration a mere ornament.) McCully's work raises the question of what, exactly, faithfulness to the original poem, or replication of its style, would consist of – especially because, in an attempt to replicate Old English rhythms, he often loses distinctive Old English syntax. For example, the famous, declarative line 'þæt wæs god cyning' is a dramatic clashing stress pattern (xx//x, technically known as a 'C type' pattern), and the word-for-word translation 'that was a good king' captures some of its emphatic simplicity. 'That was a good king', however, does not scan as a recognized Old English pattern, so McCully gives us the slightly anaemic 'He was good, that king'.

Indeed, the stringent metrical rules by which McCully operates can render his verse awkward. A Danish king is described as 'yare in winters,

yielded by God-grace | as gift, comfort'. The archaic (if Shakespearean) word 'yare', no doubt chosen for its alliteration, means 'ready, agile', rather than 'young', as McCully apparently intends; one cannot be 'nimble in winters'. The meanings of the sentence 'Extinction's flight, | and whatever his merits, is easy for no man' or the phrase 'change hallow this evil' take several attempts to grasp; both have been affected by the need for Sieversian rhythms. Fragments like 'Soul reft away, | found a less brutal and a better justice' sometimes leave the reader looking for the rest of the sentence. In other places, the syntax, though graspable, is unwieldy: 'It was as of old for that ancient race | of brave ones: anew for those bench-sitters | a feast was laid' trips up the reader with a vague pronoun and the awkward phrase 'was as of old'.

There is also a distracting overuse of ellipses and dashes, particularly in the fight with Grendel, where six ellipses appear in the space of a few lines, slowing down an action sequence that moves with brutal speed in the original. McCully's compound nouns, too, often mimic the feel of Old English compounds without truly replicating them. In line 856, for example, the word *beornas* ('warriors', 'men') is rendered as 'bone-men', to alliterate with 'Beowulf' in the previous half-line. The compound sounds like the Old English kenning for 'body', *banhus* ('bone-house'), but is an odd epithet: a 'bone-man' suggests a man made of bones, technically a description of all men, and the phrase does not function as a simile. It can feel as though we are getting a simulacrum of Old English style, without its distinctive substance.

McCully's translation raises fascinating questions about what the stylistic 'feel' of a given work consists of, where it comes from, and how it can best be captured in translation. Does Old English style lie in its patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables? Its syntax? Its alliteration? Its word choice, or use of compounds and variation? McCully asserts in his Afterword that he wanted to show continuity between Old English and modern English, but his translation in many ways points to the gulf between the two, to the immensity of language change in the intervening centuries. In order to maintain an Old English rhythm, McCully must treat all other aspects of Old English style as flexible, or optional. He chooses a particularly difficult stylistic feature to emulate, and his metrical acumen is admirable. Yet the result reads too much like one writer's attempt at tackling a personal, formal exercise.

Maria Dahvana Headley's *Beowulf: A New Translation*, by contrast, is best read as an independent work of verse. Her strikingly original interpretation of *Beowulf* is not so much a translation as a riff, or an improvisation on a familiar theme. Headley has a clarity of vision, providing an immediate answer to the question posed

by Hamer: her *Beowulf* seeks to expose and comment upon the inequalities and assumptions of privilege she traces throughout the narrative. She reads *Beowulf* as a commentary on fragile masculinity, a fable about violence through exclusion, and a meditation on the incessant vigilance required to maintain one's moral standing when surrounded by threats on all sides. Like Heaney before her, she seeks to present *Beowulf* with linguistic clarity and emotional vividness to a contemporary audience, both within and outside the academy.

There is a freshness to Headley's assertion that no single translation can offer 'sacred clarity' as a definitive interpretation of the original text, and that we should instead treat the various *Beowulf* translations on offer, including her own, as a 'banquet' to be sampled. There is a sharpness, too, to her imagining of the poem as spoken by a man to a fraternity of other men, rather than by a featureless, omniscient narrator speaking to an unspecified, but implicitly élite and educated, audience. In drawing on English words from a variety of time periods, she has achieved something rare: a unique approach to a much-translated poem. Her particular style is perhaps best illustrated by her take on the famous opening lines, in comparison to the other translations discussed here. Hamer adheres to the meaning of the original vocabulary, resulting in smooth and readable blank verse:

> Hear! we have heard the stories of the might
> of kings of the Spear-Danes in days gone by,
> and how the princes practiced valiant deeds.

McCully sacrifices exact accuracy of content for rhythmic and alliterative replication:

> Hear from yesterday, from the yore-days
> of the Spear-Danes – how sped by courage,
> how doomed in blood their best of men.

Headley, however, offers the following:

> Bro! Tell me we still know how to talk about kings! In the old days everyone knew what men were: brave, bold, glory-bound. Only stories now, but I'll sound the Spear-Danes' song, hoarded for hungry times.

Where McCully's translation is interested primarily in form, Headley's focuses entirely on substance. Headley works not with what the words of the original say, but rather what they do. The *Beowulf*-poet's summons to stories of the Spear-Danes invokes the glorious past, asserts its rightness and cultural value, and assembles his listeners into a community united

in the veneration of that rightness. Her declarative and controversial 'Bro!' is surprising, funny, and entirely defensible from a translator's point of view: like the original *hwæt*, it is both a call to attention and an identification of a communal audience, an assertion of a shared heroic register.

She uses 'bro' throughout to remind us who is speaking, and to whom. Her word 'daddy', which she insists on in preference to 'father', is a similarly loaded verbal marker, simultaneously suggesting infantilization, intergenerational privilege, and submissive eroticism. Headley's verse is muscular, hyper-articulate, and relentless in its pace:

> Bro, lemme say how fucked they were,
> in times of worst woe throwing themselves
> on luck rather than faith, fire-walkers
> swearing their feet uncharred, while
> smoke-stepping.

Or in another mode:

> I would not be eaten, nor beaten, no skewered swimmer I,
> no drowned dinner for a circle of cold companions,
> gobbling my guts, glutted on my gold.

Her *Beowulf* is exceptionally easy to read and profoundly entertaining – which seems to be an essential part of its artistic *raison d'être*. When Beowulf describes himself fighting Grendel, 'my fists deep in his rib cage, | my hands in his lungs', it seems clear Headley has achieved her stated goal of 'creating a text that felt … bloody and juicy'. She has certainly escaped Heaney's long shadow in crafting an accessible new version.

Her style, however, is not always successful, and sometimes feels overwrought or try-hard. Her use of internet slang – 'hashtag: blessed', 'put on blast' – is particularly open to question. Online terminology changes constantly, and Headley doesn't always use her terms precisely; she says Unferth 'stans' Beowulf (a transitive verb indicating obsessive loyalty or fandom) when the former lends the latter his sword, but 'stanning' is hardly the right word for the relationship between the two men, even when Unferth reluctantly acknowledges Beowulf's superiority. The usage feels forced, a self-conscious attempt to be 'contemporary', and there is a sense throughout that some of Headley's vocabulary is selected for shock value. Because online language changes so rapidly, too, it's difficult to say how well these phrases will age. '#Blessed', for example, peaked in usage in the early to mid-2010s, over-saturated Instagram and Twitter, then passed its tipping point and became

an object of ridicule, before largely fading from online discourse. To describe Wealhtheow as 'hashtag: blessed' is to use language that is already dated.

Despite her occasional over-reaching in word choice, in certain places Headley's version is more accurate than Hamer's, Nichols', or McCully's. Old English scholars have long noted the ambiguity of the noun *aglæca*, which seems to mean something like 'formidable opponent' and is applied to both the monsters and the human heroes of the poem. Only Headley translates *aglæca* as 'formidable one' in all cases, whereas Hamer, Nichols, and McCully translate the word as 'monster' (or the like) when applied to Grendel or his mother, and 'warrior' or 'fierce campaigner' when applied to Sigemund and Beowulf. When Grendel's mother grasps Beowulf with her *fingrum*, only Headley translates (accurately) 'fingers'; Hamer and Nichols offer 'claws' and 'talons'. Grendel is frequently described as a human soldier, with the Old English word *rinc* ('warrior'). Headley translates this word as 'warrior' while McCully describes him as a 'half man'. Headley's insistence on the humanity of the Grendelkin, and her concomitant assertion that *Beowulf*'s violence is political, is not a revisionist reading, but a return to the original poet's most fascinating choices. Headley pays particular attention to female figures in the poem, while Nichols fails to work into his translation the name of Hildeburh, the central figure of an important narrative digression, referring to her instead as 'the wife of Finn' while faithfully rendering the names of the men who populate her narrative episode. These discrepancies reveal the pitfalls of 'traditional' translations of a poem like *Beowulf*: adhering to previous interpretations can yield retrograde readings that reflect editorial biases rather than the sense of the original poem.

'What should a verse translation of *Beowulf* be like?' Magennis asks. 'There can be no right answer to such a question.' It is no doubt a testament to the poem's richness that four such diverse versions of it can be produced, and that each can only respond to certain aspects of its rigorous form, aesthetic complexities, and thematic depth. To experience the poem in its entirety requires, as Headley asserts, a plurality of translations and translators. A poem read over many generations demands interpretation and reinterpretation, and Beowulf has certainly achieved the fame he so desired – whether the poem's final word *lofgeornost* is rendered as 'most eager to live with honour', 'most keen for renown', 'keenest in fame', or 'He stayed thirsty! He was the man!'

St Edmund Hall, Oxford
Merton College, Oxford