

# Tolkien's Technique of Translation in his Prose *Beowulf*: Literalism and Literariness

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J.R.R. Tolkien was an author and scholar of profound imagination, and his translation of *Beowulf* is no exception. As evidenced in his famous tower allegory in *The Monsters and the Critics*, he sought imaginatively to understand Anglo-Saxon poets and their poetry, to hear and see as they would have: 'He who in those days said and who heard *flæschama* "flesh-raiment", *ban-hus* "bone-house", *hreðer-loc*a "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.'<sup>1</sup> Tolkien's translation technique for his *Beowulf* arises from this soil. As Magennis notes,<sup>2</sup> Tolkien's overarching concern is the utilitarian function of prose translation, how it provides access to the Old English text. This is connected to Tolkien's own scholarly development, where the very act of translation is in itself valuable, not simply for the end product, but also 'for the understanding of the original which it awakes'. The translation itself, however, must also be in an appropriate register for such a text, one that is 'literary and traditional', Tolkien argues, because it maintains fidelity to *Beowulf*'s own elevated register, which is 'poetic, archaic, artificial'. Tolkien's technique for translation seeks a balance between literalism, and its associated benefits for engagement with the original text, and literariness, by which the translation may avoid 'false modernity' and retain a degree of integrity to the Old English.<sup>3</sup>

The starting point for this essay will be a representative section from lines 1903b–1913, which describe the return sea-journey of *Beowulf* and his companions after the defeat of Grendel and his mother:

Gewat him on naca  
Drefan deop wæter, Dena land ofgeaf.  
Ða wæs be mæste mere-hræglasum,  
Segl sale fæst; sund-wudu þunede;  
No þær weg-flotan wind ofer yðum  
Siðes getwæfde; sæ-genga for,  
Fleat famig-heals forð ofer yðe,  
Bunden-stefna ofer brim-streamas,  
Ðæt hie Geatu clifu ongitan meahnton,  
Cuþe næssas; ceol up geþrang,  
Lyft-geswenced on lande stod.<sup>4</sup>

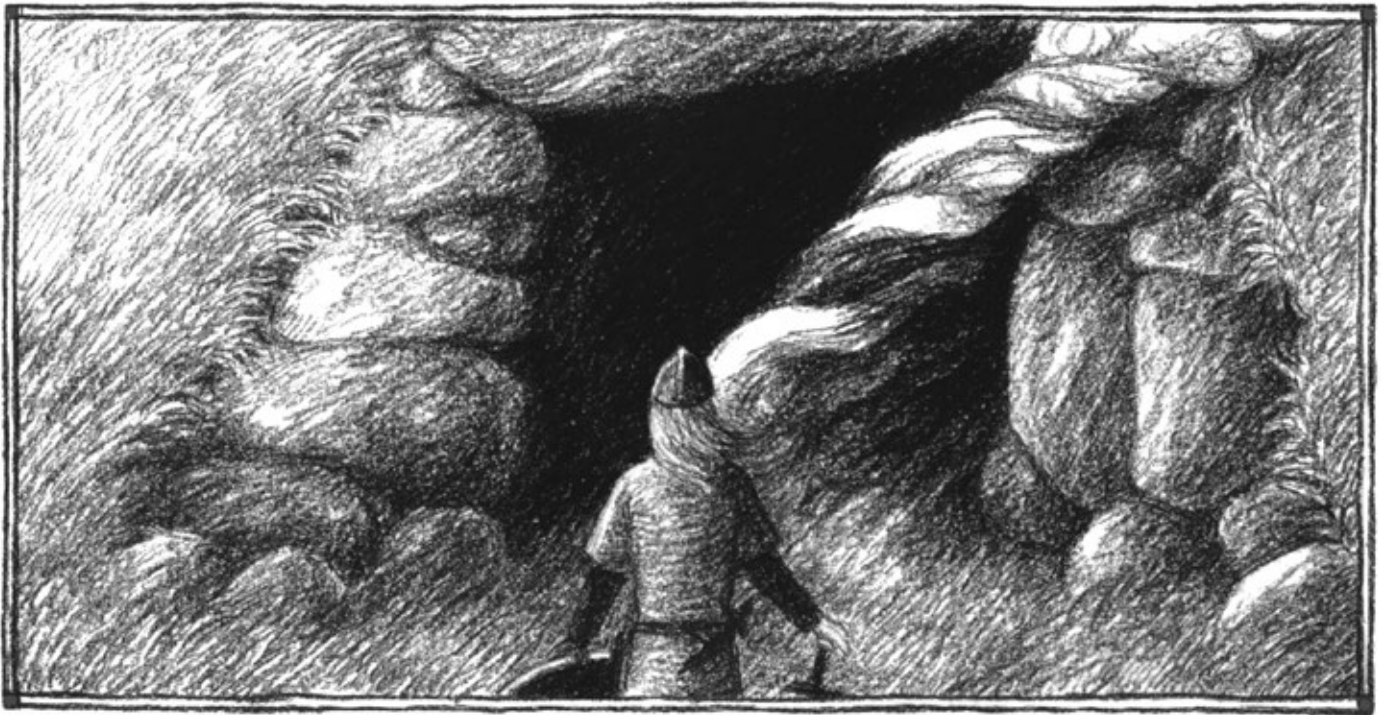
Forth sped the bark troubling the deep waters and forsook the land of the Danes. Then upon the mast was the raiment of the sea, the sail, with rope made fast. The watery timbers groaned. Nought did the wind upon the waves keep her from her course as she rode the billows. A traveller upon the sea she fared, fleeting on with foam about her throat over the waves, over the ocean-streams with wreathéd prow, until they might espy the Geatish

cliffs and headlands that they knew. Urged by the airs up drove the bark. It rested upon the land.<sup>5</sup>

The most immediately striking feature of Tolkien's translation is his attempt to preserve the word order of the Old English; this can be seen in the inverted syntax of the first sentence, which begins with '[f]orth sped' translating *gewat*<sup>6</sup> and follows with word for word correspondence with 'troubling', *drefan*, 'deep', *deop*, 'waters', *wæter*. Likewise in the second sentence where the inversion of syntax is even more marked, his translation retaining even the positioning of the poetic variation for the subject 'raiment of the sea' and 'sail'. While this is not always the case, as in 'until they might espy the Geatish cliffs' for 'þæt hie Geatu clifu ongitan meahnton', the trend toward retaining the word order when possible is noticeable throughout the translation. The prevalence of this technique is notable even when compared to other literal prose translations. The 1940 translation by Clark Hall, in which Tolkien's essay first appears, gives '[t]hen the ship went on, to ruffle the deep water',<sup>7</sup> for example, just as the 2010 translation by R.D. Fulk gives '[t]he ship set out onward, stirring the deep waters',<sup>8</sup> both following modern syntactical structure. This attempted adherence to the word order of the Old English helps the translation to function as Tolkien believes it should; for by such close rendering, the original Old English is more easily read. Yet Tolkien's translation is not slavish to the Old English, and his attempt at balance with literary prose often leads to sentences in a recognizably modern syntax.

## Literary Equivalents

In concert with this balance of literalism and literariness Tolkien goes to great lengths to translate each word into acceptably literary equivalents, though not often via cognates. This is borne out clearly in the words *naca*, *ongiton*, and *fleat*. *Naca* is a general poetic term for a boat, ship, or vessel. Here Tolkien renders it 'bark',<sup>9</sup> a decidedly literary term given the more prosaic but equally accurate 'ship' or 'boat'; the choice is all the more curious, as this is the only time he does so.<sup>10</sup> The word appears five times in *Beowulf*, and Tolkien renders three of them as 'vessel', one of them as 'ship', and only here as 'bark'. The term fits Tolkien's method, as it is both literary and traditional, and was still in contemporary literary use, primarily in poetry, in the 19th century.<sup>11</sup> Likewise he renders *ongiton*, 'perceive, see; recognize, know',<sup>12</sup> as 'espy'. Once again he has combined accuracy with an elevated register, 'espy' covering most of the lexical breadth of *ongitan*, connected to the OED's 1a, 'to descry, discern, discover (what is distant or



partially hidden),<sup>13</sup> which remained in literary use up to the 19th century. Finally, he translates *fleat*, meaning ‘to float, swim; drift or sail’, as its contemporary English derivation, ‘fleet’. Tolkien’s choice here represents his twin interests as a whole, for the term is both still in literary use, and is also an extremely literal rendering. This is a form of deliberate archaism, but one that in Tolkien’s view is justified.<sup>14</sup>

Connected with this is a second form of intentional archaism, found throughout the translation, which can be characterized as the employment of a chivalric lexis; this includes, among others, ‘prince’, ‘knight’, ‘court’, and especially, ‘esquire’. Once more Tolkien himself provides the rationale for such choices in *On Translating Beowulf*, where he argues there is ‘no reason for avoiding *knights, esquires, courts, and princes*’, as these men ‘were conceived as kings of chivalrous courts’, which aligns with Tolkien’s view of *Beowulf* as moving upon ‘the threshold of Christian chivalry’.<sup>15</sup> One example is ‘esquire’, which he employs a number of times in the text to translate a variety of Old English terms, including *magu-þegn* and *ambiht-þegn*. What unites his use of ‘esquire’ to translate these and other terms is a clear effort to designate subservient positions. In the first instance, *magu-þegn* is used by Hrothgar’s coastal guard to refer to his subordinates that he is ordering to protect Beowulf’s boat;<sup>16</sup> and in the second, *ambiht-þegn* is used to describe an attendant who is charged with holding Beowulf’s war-gear while he fights Grendel.<sup>17</sup> In a note in the commentary to line 673, ‘ombihtþegne’, Tolkien explains that Beowulf is clearly meant to be envisioned as a ‘prince’, and therefore ‘has a *þegn* attached to his personal service, as “esquire”’.<sup>18</sup> The rationale is evident in his choice of lexis; for in both uses the term is being applied to designate a young warrior functioning in a subservient and supportive way. Thus the literal and literary are upheld.

## Old English Compounds

Another translation technique is Tolkien’s consistent resolution of Old English compounds. Of this passage’s six compounds he retains only one, ‘ocean-streams’, resolving the rest. This is in keeping with his explicit methodology, where he highlights the inherent difficulty in translating compounds, but ultimately leans towards resolving them into phrases.<sup>19</sup> Many of his translations are fairly literal and succinct expansions of the imagery in the compounds: *merehræglā*, a combination of *mere*, meaning ‘sea, lake, or mere’, and *hrægel*, meaning ‘garment, dress, or robe’, to ‘raiment of the sea’; or *bundenstefna*, a combination of *bindan*, ‘to bind, tie’, and *stefna*, ‘the prow or stern of a vessel’, to ‘with wreathéd prow’. Alternatively, however, Tolkien’s translations become expansive phrases teasing out the implications of the poetic compound. For the compound *sundwudu*, a combination of *sund*, here meaning ‘sea’, and *wudu*, ‘wood’, metonymically for a wooden boat, Tolkien gives ‘the watery timbers’. When combined with the verb the full image, ‘the watery timbers groaned’, it is clear that Tolkien’s resolving is a literary exercise by which the implications of the compound are drawn out and descriptively imagined. Liuzza, for example, renders the phrase ‘the timbers creaked’.<sup>20</sup> Tolkien is focusing on expanding the metaphor but retaining his literary prose; so it is not just wood or timbers, but watery timbers, the adjectival *watery* implying planks made wet in the sea-crossing. It is more vivid and more acceptable as literary prose. A similar type of imaginative expansion occurs in the rest, helpfully exemplified by *wægflotan*. This compound is meant to function as a variation on the subject ‘ship’, and is constructed from *wæg*, meaning ‘wave, water, sea’, and *flota*, meaning ‘ship or vessel’, which other translators, such as Fulk and Liuzza, render literally as ‘wave-floater’.<sup>21</sup> Tolkien resolves the compound into a highly descriptive and

dynamic image of the vessel traversing the swelling waves, ‘as she rode the billows’, which furthers the general image of a ship travelling rough seas. It is easy to imagine this translation being re-condensed by a student, or indeed by Tolkien himself, as he read *wægflotan*, no longer seeing the passive ‘wave-floater’, but instead a sailing ship riding the billows ‘with foam about her throat’.

Tolkien’s translation of *Beowulf* therefore adheres closely to his own later methodology, including his attempt at balancing literalism with literariness, but also is directly tied to his own maturation as a scholar, where through the resolution of compounds he seeks to explore their full imaginative potential, so that when the original Old English is reread, the text is further illuminated. This desire to imaginatively to understand Anglo-Saxon poets and their poetry, to hear and see as they would have, brings a distinctive potency to Tolkien’s translation. The perilous crossing of the sea is heightened, reflective of the Old English poem itself, allowing the reader to move back towards the original text as the once unfamiliar language opens up, to feel the spume of the waves with *yþa*, hear the groaning of the sea-soaked ship with ‘sund-wudu þunedé’, and recognize the familiar cliffs that signaled the end of their sea-journey. In this way the translation is as much Tolkien as it is *Beowulf*.

- 1 J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Translating Beowulf’, *The Monsters and the Critics, and other essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins Publishing, 2006), p. 60.
- 2 Hugh Magennis, *Translating Beowulf: modern versions in English verse* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), p. 22; see also Tolkien, ‘Translating Beowulf’, pp. 51–52.
- 3 For these quotations on translation method see Tolkien, ‘Translating Beowulf’, pp. 53–54.
- 4 *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, eds. Fulk, Bjork, Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), ll. 1903b–1913. Text taken from 4th edition with consultation from first edition, published 1922, which Tolkien would have been familiar with.
- 5 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: a translation and commentary, together with Sellic Spell* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), pp. 68–69, ll. 1598–1607.
- 6 The initial position grants greater force to the verb and is clearly intentional as elsewhere, line 217a (OE *Beowulf*), for example, Tolkien translates *gewat* as the simple past ‘went’. See Tolkien, *Beowulf*, p. 19, l. 177.
- 7 *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, trans. Clark Hall (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1940), p. 117.
- 8 *The Beowulf Manuscript: complete texts and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. and trans. R.D. Fulk (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 211.
- 9 ‘bark | barque, n.2.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, ‘in modern use, applied poetically or rhetorically to any sailing vessel’.
- 10 Space prohibits a further discussion, but the variation in Tolkien’s lexis for the various terms relating to vessels (including *naca* and various forms of *flota*) seems to point to an attempt to mimic the inherent variation of the Old English poem.
- 11 ‘bark | barque, n.2.’ *OED Online*. See esp. ‘Shakespeare *Merchant of Venice* II. vi 15 The skarfed barke puts from her natiue bay;’ ‘Pope tr. Homer *Iliad* I. I. 182 We launch a Bark to plow the watery plains’.
- 12 Joseph Bosworth. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*. ed. Thomas Northcote Toller et al. Comp. Sean Christ and Ond ej Tichý. Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. All definitions for Old English taken from this dictionary.
- 13 ‘espy, v.’ *OED Online*. ADD that once again this section seems particularly dense in literariness; as in 1484a and 2770b, Tolkien gives ‘perceive’ as a translation. RETHINK, but it seems this section was mean to be descriptive and even more literary than other sections?
- 14 Compare with William Morris’ *The Tale of Beowulf* (Hamersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1895), which archaizes to an extraordinary degree.
- 15 Tolkien, ‘Translating Beowulf’, p. 57.
- 16 *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, l. 293; Tolkien’s *Beowulf*, p. 21, l. 236.
- 17 *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, l. 673; Tolkien’s *Beowulf*, p. 32, ll. 547–550, at 549.
- 18 Tolkien’s *Beowulf*, pp. 264–265.
- 19 See Tolkien, ‘Translating Beowulf’, p. 58,
- 20 *Beowulf*, trans. and ed. R.M. Liuzza, 2nd edition (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2013), p. 167, l. 1906.
- 21 *The Beowulf Manuscript: complete texts and The fight at Finnsburg*, ed. and trans. R.D. Fulk (Cambridge, Mass; London, 2010), p. 213; Liuzza, p.167, l.1908.

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# Beowulf

KATE PERLOT

On a misty night cold and clear,  
a king and his men had a feast with no fear,  
for no army had beaten them yet,  
and every cold night at the great hall they met.  
but far, far away in a swamp with a smell,  
a huge beast named Grendel lay asleep where he'd dwell,  
and when night time came Grendel snuck out,  
and walked to the castle with a smirk on his snout.  
when Grendel snuck in and the men there lay quiet,  
he ate fifteen up, as if on a man-eating diet!

Grendel did this for a while  
and every time on his snout was a smile.  
and so while Grendel did this sin,  
a strong man named Beowulf gathered his kin,  
and set off to the castle high and strong,  
off to fight Grendel until he was gone.  
when they got to the castle the king rushed out,  
and ran to meet them with joy in his shout.  
he said to the men, "do you need sharper swords?"  
and Beowulf said, "no, we'd be bored!  
if we fought this monster from the heath,  
all he has are sharp claws and teeth.  
and so if we used our swords,  
it wouldn't be fair,  
and so I'll take off my sword  
and leave my hands bare."

So that night Beowulf locked the door,  
and they waited for Grendel while pretending to snore.  
when Grendel came, ready to feast on some men,  
Beowulf twisted Grendel's arm again and again  
Beowulf twisted again and the arm popped off  
making Grendel un-able to trot!  
Then Grendel hopped off and men looked all around  
but when they got to the lake, Grendel had jumped in and drowned.  
and then the king said,  
"Beowulf so mighty of hand,  
you shall be lord over my land,  
for killing this big and frightening beast,  
all of your days you shall have a grand feast,  
and you and your tale shall never grow old,  
and to thank you again, armor made of pure gold.  
you have shown your bravery in many ways,  
and so you will be in my heart for all of my days."

The End

