

Beowulf Group Work – *Beowulf* in translation



One thing that you should remember – what you are reading is a translation of *Beowulf* – not the actual *article*. And, in a sense, it has been translated in at least 2 ways – first from an oral to a written medium (means of communication), and then from Old English into our modern version of that same language. This group work will examine what happens in that latter translation from Old English to Modern English.

10 minutes Make sure that your group has a time keeper. Begin by dividing your group into 2 different sets of *experts*. Half of your group – **the poetry experts** -- should read over the translations provided. Know them; understand it. Talk about it with your other experts.

The other half of your group – **the Old English experts** – should look at the handout on Old English pronunciation (taking notes or highlighting notes) and

the original Old English of the passage for which you have 6 translations. You may find it helpful to divide the Old English passage up amongst your Old English Experts. To the best of your ability (with each of the Old English experts helping you) read aloud the Old English translation as many times (getting it better each time) as time permits.

30 minutes – fill in the attached chart (your group will turn in one chart -- all group members should fill in their own to study from).

You will rank each of the translations based on the different criteria (imagery, sound, etc.) given in the table, numbering them 1 (**best**) to 6 (**weakest**). No number should be repeated in any given criteria. You must have a reason for your rankings. And for your two top choices you must include a quote and brief explanation of your choice (make sure every group member has a reason – and a specific quote or idea in mind for their choices).

Take a vote on each of the translators for each of the criteria – tally up your votes and rank them according to group consensus. For the second criteria, poetry, each of the poetry experts votes should count for two votes. Before you begin discussing the third criteria, sound, have the “best” of your Old English experts read the passage for the group. After that, vote on each of the translators, but in this case, count each of the Old English experts’ vote twice. For the first and last criteria everyone votes equally. Turn in your neatest copy with everyone’s name on it and your class period.

Old English Pronunciation Guide

The following handout is taken directly from Murray McGillivray's website – if you'd like to see more go to <http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/eduweb/engl401/lessons/pronunc1.htm>

The Old English Alphabet

The Old English alphabet, like the Modern English alphabet, is based on the Roman letters, but the alphabet is slightly different than the one we use, as you will see if you glance at some of the readings for the course.. The Anglo-Saxons did not use the letters **v** and **j** (which were invented later), and **q** and **z** were used only very occasionally. They used the letter **æ**, which we do not use. They also introduced three letters not present in the Roman alphabet, called *thorn*, *eth*, and *wynn*. The last of these (*wynn*) is represented by a **w** in modern editions and in this course, so need not be learned at this point. *Thorn*, which is **Þ** as a capital and **þ** as a small letter, and *eth*, which is **Ð** and **ð**, were both developed by Anglo-Saxon scribes to represent a sound that was not present in Latin (and for that reason was not in the Roman alphabet), the sound that Modern English represents with the letters **th**.

The following consonants are pronounced in Old English in much the same way as they are in Modern English:

b, d, k, l, m, n, p, r, t, x

The consonants **s**, **f**, and **þ**, **ð** are pronounced as follows:

s is pronounced like Modern English **s** at the beginning of a word, at the end of a word, or if it is next to an unvoiced consonant within a word.

s is pronounced like Modern English **z** if it comes between two vowels or between a vowel and a voiced consonant within a word.

f is pronounced like Modern English **f** at the beginning of a word, at the end of a word, or if it is next to an unvoiced consonant within a word.

f is pronounced like Modern English **v** if it comes between two vowels or between a vowel and a voiced consonant within a word.

þ OR **ð** are pronounced like Modern English **th** in the word **thin** (i.e. the unvoiced sound) at the beginning of a word, at the end of a word, or if one of them is next to an unvoiced consonant within a word. (These two letters are alternate writings of the same consonant sound.)

þ OR **ð** are pronounced like Modern English **th** in the word **that** (i.e. the voiced sound) if one of them comes between two vowels or between a vowel and a voiced consonant within a word. (These two letters are alternate writings of the same consonant sound.)

Scotese note: for the purposes of this exercise – pronounce the vowels how you normally would unless you see a line above the vowel, then like in the dictionary's pronunciation guide, pronounce it as a long vowel.

	Moncrief (1921)	Leonard (1939)	Kennedy (1940)	Raffel (1963)	Donaldson (1940)	Heaney (2000)
<i>for imagery</i> how vivid, descriptive, and moving are the images -- do you imagine the scene						
<i>for poetics</i> how closely does the translation follow Old English poetical form: kennings, 4 stresses, kennings						
<i>for sound</i> how closely it resembles the original sounds (Old English experts impt.)						
<i>for overall readability</i> how easy is the work to read						

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Beowulf: An Edition*, edited by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (1998)

- 710 Ða com of more under misthleoþum
 Grendel gongan, godes yrre bær,
 mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
 summe besyrwan in sele þam hean.
 Wod under wolcnum to þæs þe he winreced
- 715 goldsele gumena gearwost wisse
 fættum fahne. Ne wæs þæt forma sið
 þæt he Hroðgares ham gesohte;
 næfre he on aldordagum ær ne siþðan
 heardran hæle healðegnas fand.
- 720 Com þa to reced rinc siðian
 dreamum bedæld. Duru sona onarn
 fyrbendum fæst syþðan he hire folmum onhran;
 onbræd þa bealohydig, ða he gebolgen wæs,
 recedes muþan. Raþe æfter þon
- 725 on fagne flor feond treddode,
 eode yrremod; him of eagum stod
 ligge gelicost leoht unfæger.
 Geseah he in recede rinca manige
 swefan sibbedriht samod ætgædere
- 730 magorinca heap. Þa his mod ahlog;
 mynte þæt he gedælde, ær þon dæg cwome,
 atol aglæca anra gehwylces
 lif wið lice þa him alumpen wæs
 wistfille wen. Ne wæs þæt wyrd þa gen
- 735 þæt he ma moste manna cynnes
 ðicgean ofer þa niht.

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Widsith, Beowulf, Finsburgh, Waldere, Deor: Done into the Common English After the Old Manner*, translated by Charles Scott Moncrieff (1921)

- 710 Then came from the moor / under misty slopes
Grendel gliding, / God's ire he bare ;
Was minded, that murderer, / of mannes-kind
Some to ensnare / in that solemn hall.
Waded he under the welkin / till he the wine-house,
715 Gold-hall of grooms / might get well is sight,
With filigrees fretted ; nor was it the first time
That he Hrothgar's / home had sought.
Nor ever in his days did he, / ere nor after,
Hardier hero / nor hall-thegns find.
- 720 Came then to the house / that creature hieing,
From delights divided ; / the door soon opened,
Through with fired-bands fastened, / when his fingers touched it
Burst he in then balefully-minded, / when boiling he was,
The mouth of the room. / Rapidly after
- 725 On its fashioned floor / the fiend was treading,
On went he ireful, / in his eyes there shone,
To leaping-flame likest, / a light unlovely,
Saw he in the hall / heroes many,
A cousin-band sleeping / couched together,
- 730 A head of friendly warriors. / Then his heart laughed out ;
He was minded to divide, / ere the day came,
That ugly devil, / in each and all
The life from the limbs ; / then lust to him came
Of feasting his fill. / Nor was it fated again
- 735 That more he might / of mannes-kind
Stomach after that night.

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Beowulf*, translated by William Ellery Leonard (1939)

- 710 And now from out the moorland, under the misty slopes
Came astalking Grendel— God's anger on his hopes.
That Scather foul was minded to snare of human kin
Some one, or sundry, that high hall within.
Under the welkin strode he, until full well he spied
- 715 The wine-house, the gold-hall, with fret-work glittering wide.
Nor was that the first time Hrothgar's home he sought.
Yet never in his life-days, late or early, aught
Like this harsh welcome found he from thanemen in the hall.
He came afooting onward to the house withal,
- 720 This warring One that ever had been from bliss out-cast;
Forthwith the door sprang open, with forged-bolts through fast,
When with his paws he pressed it; yea, then on bale-work bent,
Swoln as he was with fury, that house's mouth he rent,
Anon he Fiend was treading the shining floor in there;
- 725 On he moved in anger; from eyes of him did glare,
Unto fire likest, a light unfair.
He saw within the chamber many a man asleep,—
Kinsmen band together, of clanfolk a heap;
Laughed his mood, was minded that Hobgoblin grim,
- 730 Ere the dawn to sunder each his life from limb,
Now that fill-of-feeding he weened awaited him!
But Wyrð it was that would not longer grant him might
To seize on more of mankind after that same night.

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*, translated by Charles W. Kennedy (1940)

- 710 From the stretching moors, from the misty hollows,
Grendel came creeping, accursed of God,
A murderous ravager minded to snare
Spoil of heroes in high-built hall.
Under clouded heavens he held his way
- 715 Till there rose before him the high-roofed house,
Wine-hall of warriors gleaming with gold.
Nor was it the first time of his fierce assaults
On the home of Hrothgar; but never before
Had he found worse fate or hardier hall-thanes!
- 720 Storming the building he burst the portal,
Through fastened of iron, with fiendish strength;
Forced open the entrance in savage fury
And rushed in rage o'er the shining floor.
A baleful glare from his eyes was gleaming
- 725 Most like to a flame. He found in the hall
Many a warrior sealed in slumber,
A host of kinsmen. His heart rejoiced;
The savage monster was minded to sever
Lives from bodies ere break of day,
- 730 To feast his fill of the flesh of men.
But he was not fated to glut his greed
With more of mankind when the night was ended!

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Beowulf*, translated by Burton Raffel (1963)

- 710 Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
715 Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
720 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch
And he rushed angrily over the threshold.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
725 Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
With rows of young soldiers resting together.
730 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
By morning; the monster's mind was hot
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
735 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper.

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation*, translated by E. Talbot Donaldson (1975)

Then from the moor under the mist-hills Grendel came walking, wearing God's anger. The foul ravager thought to catch some one of mankind there in the high hall. Under the clouds he moved until he could see most clearly the wine-hall, treasure-house of men, shining with gold. That was not the first time that he had sought Hrothgar's home. Never before or since in his life-days did he find harder luck, hardier hall-thanes. The creature deprived of joy came walking to the hall. Quickly the door gave way, fastened with fire-forged bands, when he touched it with his hands. Driven by evil desire, swollen with rage, he tore it open, the hall's mouth. After that the foe at once stepped onto the shining floor, advanced angrily. From his eyes came a light not fair, most like flame. He saw many men in the hall, a band of kinsmen all asleep together, a company of war-men. then his heart laughed: dreadful monster, he thought that before the day came he would divide the life from the body of every one of them, for there had come to him a hope of full-feasting. It was not his fate that when that night was over he should feast on more of mankind.

Beowulf Translations Handout

from *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, translated by Seamus Heaney
(2000)

- 710 In off the moors, down through the mist bands
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it
- 715 until it shone above him, a sheer keep
of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time
he had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling—
although never in his life, before or since,
did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.
- 720 Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead
and arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door
turned on its hinge when his hands touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
- 725 pacing the length of the patterned floor
with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,
flame more than light, flared from his eyes.
He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,
a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors
- 730 quartered together. And his glee was demonic,
picturing the mayhem: before morning
he would rip life from limb and devour them,
feed on their flesh; but his fate that night
was due to change, his days of ravaging
- 735 had come to an end.