

Beowulf: Lost in Translation?

We're going to look at several translations of the same scene in *Beowulf*, one of the grossest, coolest parts of the poem: the scene in which Beowulf rips Grendel's arm off. Read these translations, then answer the questions on the reverse.

A bitter parting
from life was that day destined for him;
the eldritch spirit was sent off on his
far faring into the fiends' domain.
It was then that this monster, who, moved by spite
against human kind, had caused so much harm
~ so feuding with God ~ found at last
that flesh and bone were to fail him in the end;
for Hygelac's great-hearted kinsman
had him by the hand; and hateful to each
was the breath of the other.

A breach in the giant
flesh-frame showed then, shoulder-muscles
sprang apart, there was a snapping of tendons,
bone-locks burst. To Beowulf the glory
of this fight was granted;

Michael Alexander, 1973

Grendel's death, his departure from this world,
was destined to be wretched, his migrating spirit
was fated to travel far into the power of fiends.
Then he who for years had committed crimes
against mankind, murderous in mind,
and had warred with God, discovered
that the strength of his body could not save him,
that Hygelac's brave kinsman held his hand
in a vice-like grip; each was a mortal enemy
to the other. The horrible monster
suffered grievous pain; a gaping wound
opened on his shoulder; the sinews sprang apart,
the muscles were bursting. Glory in battle
was given to Beowulf;

Kevin Crossley-Holland, 1999

But his going away
out of this world and the days of his life
would be agony to him, and his alien spirit
would travel far into fiends' keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men
with pain and affliction in former times
and had given offence to God
found that his bodily powers failed him.
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly
locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived,
he was hateful to the other. The monster's whole
body was in pain, a tremendous wound
appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split
and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted
the glory of winning.

Seamus Heaney, 2000

But he was to make a miserable parting from life on that day;
the alien spirit was destined to travel afar in the power of fiends.
Now he who had afflicted the hearts of mankind so much in
earlier days and had committed so many crimes - he was at odds
with God - discovered that his body was of no use to him, for
Hygelac's brave kinsman had him in his grip.

Neither could bear to see the other stay alive. The horrible
monster felt mortal pain as a huge wound tore apart his
shoulder; his sinews sprang open and muscle ripped from bone.

Constance Heatt, 1967

Beowulf: Lost in Translation Questions

1. Compare the translations. What are the major differences that you see? The major similarities?
2. Burton Raffel translated the version in your textbook (p. 48, lines 381-393) in 1963. Compare this version with the others on the reverse.
3. Which translation do you think is most interesting/exciting/easy to understand/appealing?
4. What Anglo-Saxon literary devices that we've studied (kennings, caesuras, alliteration) appear? In which versions are these devices preserved?
5. Which Anglo-Saxon literary devices don't seem to translate well—in other words, they don't appear to be easy for translators to work into their versions of *Beowulf*? Speculate: why do you think this might be?
6. I included one prose translation of *Beowulf*, though many more exist. How do you think a prose translation differs from a poetic one? What qualities might be compromised in a prose translation?
7. What conclusions can you draw about the process of translation?
8. What would your advice be to translators (consider the following: What do they need to think about in order to produce a readable translation that is still faithful to the spirit of the poem? What should they avoid doing?)



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