Chronotopos
A Journal of Translation History

Bíborka Radványi

Headley, Maria Dahvana (2020): *Beowulf: A New Translation*. New York: MCD x FSG Originals.

2/2024
DOI: 10.70596/cts188

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au / Edited at: Institute of Applied Linguistics and Translatology (IALT), Leipzig University
ISSN: 2617-3441

Zum Zitieren des Artikels / Pour citer l'article / To cite the article:
Radványi, Bíborka (2025): Headley, Maria Dahvana (2020): Beowulf: A New Translation. New York: MCD x FSG Originals (book review), *Chronotopos* 6 (2), 192–197. DOI: 10.70596/cts188

Bíborka Radványi

Headley, Maria Dahvana (2020): *Beowulf: A New Translation*. New York: MCD x FSG Originals.

Maria Dahvana Headley's translation of *Beowulf* interprets the ancient epic through modern eyes, and presents it to the readers in the same modern, fresh, and, as the translator herself described it, even a bit satirical manner (11). The poem itself has been translated many times into Modern English both by authors focusing on the literary nature of the text, such as Seamus Heaney or J. R. R Tolkien, and translators concentrating on the scholarly aspects of the text, such as R. M. Liuzza or R.D. Fulk, Headley's rendition of Beowulf aims to be radically different from previous translations.

While *Beowulf* in past translations appeared as a rather exalted, tragic story with a hero who is, in many ways, an exemplary warrior, Headley's protagonist embraces a boastful nature rooted in 21st century attitudes: his boasts seem more like manifestations of an aggressive, bragging masculinity, as opposed to the Old English boasts that were closer to promises of great deeds, due to the style given to Beowulf. When talking about his undertaking to kill Grendel, Beowulf says the following words: "Now, I want to test my mettle on Grendel, best him,/a match from man into meat. Just us two,/hand to hand. Sweet." (HEADLEY 2020: 21). While the speech still promises to deal with Grendel, the way in which it is formulated shifts the focus to Beowulf's arrogance. This Beowulf has his own set of faults, some of which are rooted in his pride; however, he eventually faces the same, or at least similar struggles with which the Beowulf of previous translations had to cope.

One of the peculiarities of Headley's translation of Beowulf is the language, or rather the sociolect she uses. On the one hand, battle scenes and tragedies are described in a pulsating, beautiful, untamed manner; on the other hand, the language of the narrator, and sometimes even that of the dialogues, is often fraught with slang phrases and expressions of familiarity, which frame the setting in a different way than previous translations or even the original text. Headley's Beowulf, for example, is not afraid to state plainly that "Anyone who fucks with the Geats? Bro, they have to fuck with me." (HEADLEY 2020: 21), and the narrator also uses the invocation "bro" not only to draw the audience's attention to a certain plot point, but also to start the poem. It is, however, important to note that the translation of the starting word of the poem, *hwæt*, is not evident. Whereas the word itself might simply mean "what" or serve as an interjection, translators have come up with different solutions: in Tolkien's rendition (2014), it is translated to "lo!" (13), Heaney (1999) translated it to the more colloquial "so" (3). In this respect, Headley's choice to translate *hwæt* to "bro" is peculiar because

of its slang-based nature, but it also corresponds to Tolkien's method: while Tolkien's whole translation is archaic, Headley's rendition has an informal style. Moreover, Headley's decision to present Beowulf's story in a way that differs from the original in terms of style or choice of words, is not entirely unprecedented: Tolkien (2014), for example, used the term "knight" to describe the warriors of the hall (13), even though the story evidently predates the role and ideals of knighthood. While Tolkien's choice of words might shift the focus to the ideal-like nature of Beowulf as a hero, Headley's decision to use the tone of familiarity and informality paints a more "interactive" scene than the previous translations: the reader can easily imagine that this story is being told to them in the very present by a storyteller who makes themselves be seen by addressing the audience, or, in some cases, by including swearing and profane phrases in dialogues to express the tension between two characters. Moreover, Headley's use of colloquial forms removes the linguistic burdens placed on the plot by previous translations that often present the story in a more serious and elevated manner through the use of archaic, complicated forms, which might cause difficulties in interpretation and create a barrier between the story and the audience, hindering engagement. Headley's way of storytelling, however, creates an air of immediacy and intimacy, which are in close relation to Beowulf's possible origins as a piece of oral literature, and preserve the atmosphere of the original.

This feeling of immediacy and the traces of oral tradition are easily spotted in the form in which Headley presents the poem. The form diverges from that of the Old English. In Old English poems, there is no rhyme, and the cohesive element is the alliteration of certain stressed words in a line, hence the name "alliterative meter". Lines are divided into two half-lines, both of which usually contain two stressed words, and the first stressed words in both half lines are supposed to alliterate. Headley's translation diverges from the Old English verse forms in more ways: firstly, she does not divide lines into half-lines, and secondly, while alliteration does appear in the text, it is used as a decorative, not a cohesive element. Moreover, the text also includes in-line rhymes and enjambment together with the alliteration, which create the illusion of speech, see for example: "We've suffered years/of hall-harvesting here, but hard times are done/at last. God is good. Grendel is gone." (HEADLEY 2020: 42). In this way, Headley manages to pay respect to the original form and create a modern flow and pleasant rhythm to the translation. This style allows readers to entirely immerse themselves into the atmosphere of listening to a story.

Apart from creating a very strong atmosphere, Headley also introduces a new perspective into her translation: feminism. Headley herself positions the translation as a feminist one, but this feminist approach, in most cases, does not appear as invasive in the text, since Old English poetry in general allows the existence of strong female figures, see e.g. Judith or Elene. Furthermore, Headley can only expand the presentation of women in positions of power in her translation because *Beowulf* already includes a number of queens that influence or try to influence the events, thus their presence and roles are inherently organic to the story. Headley takes care to protect the agency and personality of the female characters that appear in the poem,

and presents them in just as lively and remarkable manner as she presents the male characters. Wealhtheow in her translation becomes a woman who wields the softer tools of manipulation elegantly and efficiently, Freawaru's tragedy becomes more attainable and more imminent, and Hygd's worry for her son also gains its own spotlight. Most importantly, however, Headley decided to paint a more sympathetic portrait of Grendel's mother, creating an image of her that corresponds to a number of feminist readings of Beowulf: that Grendel's mother is more than a simple monster; she is a vengeful warrior seeking retribution for the murder of her son, or even the antitype of the feminine ideal (see e.g. Hennequin, Chance or Dockray-Miller).

In the introduction to the translation, Headley mentions the Old-English word *ægléca* and its feminine form, *aglæcwif*, the meaning of which is ambiguous. In most translations of *Beowulf*, it is used as a positive word when describing Beowulf himself, and as a negative one when it refers to Grendel's mother. The greatest difference appears in Heaney's translation. He (1999) translates *aglæcwif* as "monstrous hell-bride" (42), but *ægléca* becomes "fierce contender" when it applies to Beowulf and the dragon (15). Tolkien's translation (2014) shows a smaller difference, yet the monstrosity of Grendel's mother is emphasized by him as well: *aglæcwif* is translated as "ogress, fierce destroyer" (49), while he uses the expression "fierce slayer" (88) in other situations. Headley (2020) decided to diminish this discrepancy: Grendel's mother is described as a "warrior-woman, outlaw" (56), and the word *ægléca* is simply translated as "the two" when it depicts the fight of Beowulf and the dragon (111).[1]

While this sympathetic translation of Grendel's mother might appear as a stretch in the light of previous translations of *Beowulf*, it is important to state that the justifiability of her motives and her status as a monster are questions that seem to appear both in the original text and in scholarly discussions. Dockray-Miller (2000) emphasizes Grendel's mother's utter devotion to his son (89), and Hennequin (2008), for example, argues that while Grendel's mother crosses Old English gender boundaries, she is not portrayed as a monster or a villain (504), as opposed to Acker (2006), who proposes that the male-coded behaviour of Grendel's mother only enhances her monstrosity in the face of her gender (705). Chance (1986) proposes that while Grendel's mother recreates the monstrosity of his son by attacking Heorot, she is also a lady; a retainer of her own hall, thus plays a dual role (97). It is thus important to note that while arguments against the representation of Grendel's mother as an avenger with justifiable motives might be raised, showing her in such light brings a new and supportable understanding to Beowulf translations.

Another great quality of Headley's translation is the introduction of humour and irony into the text. While it is impossible to guess which parts, if any, were meant to be understood as humorous by an Old English audience, the episode in which Unferth questions Beowulf's heroism and abilities and Beowulf's response does seem to contain some deep-seated irony which excellently appears in this rendition of the story

[1] Interestingly, when the word *ægléca* describes Grendel, only Tolkien keeps a rather neutral tone by translating it to "fierce slayer" (2014: 25), while Heaney chooses "monster" (1999: 15), and Headley decides on "pest" (2020: 21).

(Headley 2020, 24–28). Irony, for example, already shines in Beowulf's reply, when he addresses Unferth as "*buddy*", italics by the translator (25). This satirical nature often reemerges when Unferth takes the stage. Unferth himself appears as a lowly, unheroic, cowardly fellow; a comic relief compared to the competent Beowulf. His previous testing of Beowulf is later contextualized as "Note: the stone-bold son of Ecglaf had been blackout drunk when he said that stuff he'd said" (HEADLEY 2020: 64). This light-hearted layer ties into the immediacy of the presentation, and allows the audience to engage with the poem not only as a distanced heroic tragedy, but also as a more human, more accessible story.

A quite peculiar characteristic of the translation is that, due to the use of modern slang, the text might be viewed as "exclusive" in the sense that it is only to be fully experienced by the generation that uses these slang expressions and possesses the language of Headley's Beowulf. In this manner, the text speaks directly to its implied audience and removes the linguistic impediments between the poem, or the narrator, and the readers, while creating a linguistic distance from those who would expect and accept a more traditional, more archaic rendition. Because of this, members of the audience can easily feel like they really belong to the circle whom this story addresses. This exclusivity, however, is also one of the long-term disadvantages of the translation. Since slang and phrases of informal language use change fast, the text might age sooner than other translations. Moreover, the slang and swearing-packed phrasing might repel many readers who would expect the story to appear in the rather serious form the original presents.

Apart from the merits of the translation, it does have some disadvantages as well, which, in most cases, are related to the lack of nuances mentioned in connection with the characterization of Grendel's mother, which often narrows down the way the poem can be interpreted. As mentioned above, Grendel's mother appears as a valiant warrior with a justifiable cause, while the original poem leaves the validity of her motives up to interpretation. On the one hand, she is trying to take revenge for her son, on the other hand, Grendel's actions play a crucial part in his expulsion from human society, thus violence against him cannot be subjected to the same legal criteria as the murder of law-abiding warriors, which might make the revenge of his mother unjustified. This issue, however, is not evident in translation. Instead of stating Grendel's guilt in terms of the massacres, Headley (2020) states that "Beowulf tore […] and bore [Grendel]/into afterlife, never mind years of his own crime" (59), and even shows Hrothgar blaming Beowulf for the attacks of Grendel's mother when discussing the situation with him: "This is on you. She threw/herself into a blood feud after you slew her son" (59). In a similar fashion, the character of Modthryth is also somewhat simplified, as she appears rather as someone looked down on before her marriage, while Sebo and Schilling, for example, argue that the Old English text itself is ambiguous about her portrayal, and she can have more sympathetic readings, making her more of a "success story" both from a story-centred and feminist perspective, especially if compared to other brides in Beowulf, such as Hildeburh or Freawaru, see

Sebo and Schilling's article "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England" (2021).

The dragon's presentation as a female character can also feel like an unnecessary addition, or even one that harms the understanding. Originally, Beowulf fights a male and a female being, and a force of nature that he, even as the greatest hero, cannot overcome without a high price. Moreover, in the original text, the dragon appears as male: male pronouns are used in his descriptions (see e.g. line 2828). In Headley's translation, however, the dragon's femininity might create confusion in the interpretation of the dragon: in this way, Beowulf faces two female figures protecting their home and taking vengeance for the disturbance of it, which might lead to conclusions not inherent to the original poem.

In the same vein, while the introduction of humour does make the text livelier, the presentation of Unferth rules out other possible roles he might play in the political matrix of the story apart from that of the "comic relief". Certain interpretations, such as Eliason's (1963), suggest that Unferth's questioning of Beowulf serves as a way of entertainment; no more than the interaction of a guest and a jester (271). Moreover, Fulk (1987) comments that the text implies that Unferth's challenge was, in fact, serious, and not just an act of folly, and that Unferth himself might possess strength comparable to Beowulf (116). Beowulf's presented attitude towards Unferth in Headley's translation, however, diminishes Unferth's importance and the idea that Beowulf had to seriously consider the challenge of a Danish warrior before he was truly accepted as the possible slayer of Grendel.

In addition, while both the male and the female characters have their own personality and voice in Headley's translation, it appears as if a shift had been made to emphasize the individual rather than the community. This feature affects the male characters the most, since, as opposed to the women who usually appear among men without a female connection on which rely, men appear among themselves, and their relationships, the importance of mutuality in aid and their reliance on each other is an important aspect of the poem. In the Old English era, social ties had a significant role, and the relationship between lords and thanes was one of mutual aid: the lord gave riches to the warriors, who, in turn, served him loyally, and provided assistance even well into the lord's old age or at the time of his imminent death. Since Headley's translation does not focus on social ties, Beowulf's aging is presented as an unresolved and unresolvable tragedy, since he cannot fight the dragon on his own terms due to his age, while the tragedy of him not being aided by all the younger warriors is reduced. In the original text, however, it is implied that the effects of age might be alleviated through one's actions towards the younger members of a tribe: the young Beowulf's heroism helps the old Hrothgar, and the young Wiglaf's courage gives enough ferocity to the old Beowulf to slay the dragon. Sutton (2007), for example, proposes that Wiglaf in this fight plays the role of a helper: through his inspiring words and actions, Beowulf finds the strength to fight back, and achieves a heroic death as a result (53). This, while the losses caused by old age are evidently present in the original as well, it also proposes a way in which these losses might be minimized and the fame of a warrior might be protected from its effects.

A similar ambiguity appears in the language and the tone of the text, too. While Headley uses modern, colloquial and informal phrases that make the reading experience easier, she also incorporates the Old English tradition of using kennings into the text. Kennings in Old English are compound phrases that carry a metaphorical meaning, e.g. "battle sweat" [heaðuswat] is the kenning for blood. On the one hand, the use of this device preserves an Old English poetic tradition, yet on the other hand, kennings make the otherwise easy-to-follow text more of a challenge, which the readers might not be expecting in the lack of archaic expressions and complicated forms.

In conclusion, Headley's translation of Beowulf paints a fresh, bewildering and often surprising image of the epic. It is tuned to the needs of a very specific audience, and manages to create an interaction-filled, close and exclusive atmosphere in which the readers can feel at ease without being burdened by the overcomplicated and archaic phrasing of previous translations. While the translation does limit the ways in which the text might be understood, it provides a new angle for interpretation; one that can be supported by the Old English text and which allows newer readings to reach a wider audience.

References

ACKER, Paul (2006): "Horror and the Maternal in 'Beowulf'", *PMLA* 121, 702-16.

CHANCE, Jane (1986): *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

DOCKRAY-MILLER, Mary (2000): *Motherhood and Mothering in Anglo-Saxon England*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

ELIASON, Norman E. (1963): "The Þyle and Scop in Beowulf", *Speculum*, 38(2), 267-284. https://doi.org/10.2307/2852453.

FULK, Robert D. (1987): "Unferth and His Name", *Modern Philology* 85(2), 113-127. http://www.jstor.org/stable/437181.

HEANEY, Seamus (1999): *Beowulf. A New Verse Translation*. London: Faber and Faber.

HENNEQUIN, M. Wendy (2008): "We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother", *English Studies* 89, 503-523.

SEBO, Erin, & SCHILLING, Cassandra (2021): "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England", *English Studies* 102(6), 637-650. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2021.1966966.

SUTTON, John William (2007): *Death and Violence in Old and Middle English Literature*. Lewiston: Ewin Mellen Press.

TOLKIEN, John R. R. (2014): *Beowulf. A Translation and Commentary*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt.