The Importance of Morris’s *Beowulf*

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It is hard to imagine a translator more suited to tackling the notoriously difficult *Beowulf* than William Morris - a poet of the first rank with both the energy and the ability to come to terms with its original Anglo-Saxon language and, more important, one with an intuitive grasp of its bleak and heroic northernness. Yet almost all deem Morris’s translation, done with the help of A. J. Wyatt, a failure. For over a hundred years critics have dismissed it, mostly ignored it. Morris’s first biographer, J. W. Mackail, writes of it: ‘It would seem on the whole, in spite of the love and labour Morris had bestowed on it, to be one of his failures’.1 And his latest biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, agrees: ‘Few people have had a good word to say for Morris’s *Beowulf* (least of all in Oxford). I will not attempt one. It is Morris at his most garrulous and loose’.2 While I agree with these two eloquent and authoritative voices that there are problems with the poem, I do wish to attempt a good word about it. It is, I argue, important for Morris’s development as a writer of prose romance, its quirkiness has an interesting resonance with the original, and he has accomplished what few translators of *Beowulf* have done – a balance of accuracy and poetic excitement.

The circumstances attending Morris’s translation of *Beowulf* are as follows: in 1892 Morris contacted A. J. Wyatt, an Anglo-Saxonist at Christ’s College, Cambridge, to provide for him a prose rendering of *Beowulf* to serve as a base for a poetical version. In addition, Morris convinced Wyatt to read through the original with him – an arrangement not dissimilar to the one he had with Eirikr Magnusson for translating Icelandic sagas. There survives some correspondence between Morris and Wyatt about their collaboration. On 28 August 1892 Morris writes to Wyatt:

> Of course every word which it is necessary to substitute for the old one ... must be weakened and almost destroyed. Still as the language is a different language from modern English and not merely a different form of it, it can, I would hope, be translated and para-phrased merely. Anyhow I intend to try if I can get anyone to help me who knows Anglo-Saxon (as I do not) and could also set me right as to the text and its grievous gaps.3

Morris here reduces the difficulties to two – vocabulary and ‘grievous gaps’ – the latter a rather puzzling comment to which I will return. The difficulty of vocabulary, moreover, is for Morris a function of linguistic change: the old words have lost their meaning and the modern words ‘weaken’ or ‘destroy’ that meaning. Given his self-professed ignorance of Old English, he had with amazing clarity identified arguably the most important difficulty of translating it. For instance, there is an abundance of Old English words for ‘warrior’ – secg, rincga, guma, helleð, etc., but Modern English only gives us one. There were presumably shadings of meaning among these words lost to us: hence ‘warrior’ weakens if not destroys the meaning of a given line.

Some six months later (26 February 1893), Morris writes to Wyatt: ‘I have rhymed up the lines of Beowulf which you sent me’.4 What is interesting is the curious word
he uses to describe this new craft—"rhyming". The original *Beowulf* does not rhyme; nor does Morris's translation of it. "Rhyming" can thus only be a loose synonym for "rendering into poetry", and the word is interesting because of its anachronism, for rhyming in its stricter meaning did not become dominant in English poetry until the fourteenth century, long after *Beowulf*'s composition. Morris's word reveals, no doubt unconsciously, what the real problem with his poem is— not vocabulary but the imposition of an anachronistic prosody on the poem.

By October the 8th, much has been done, but we can hear a note of exhaustion in Morris that was absent eight months before. He comments, 'I am writing steadily at the book but it is (of course) difficult to me. I much enjoy doing it.' A year later the project is finished, and he writes to Wyatt (10 November 1894) disputing the inclusion of an extensive glossary:

As to the glossary: I think our views as to what is wanted in this case differ; or rather we have not understood one another. I thought that all we wanted was a few very unusual words taken from M.E. such as brim or worth, and perhaps one or two sentences, though I think these would mostly explain themselves by the context except the few words aforesaid, almost all in the glossary I should not hesitate to use in an original poem of my own, you see: and I don't think it would need a glossary.  

Evidently Morris won out, for the glossary that accompanied the poem contained only 88 entries, a mere page and a half. That aside, in this letter Morris ends where he started, with a *Beowulf* translation problematic because of its archaizing vocabulary. Mackail specifies what for him is wrong with this type of vocabulary: 'In his desire to reproduce the early English manner he allowed himself a harshness of construction and a strangeness of vocabulary that in many passages go near to making his version unintelligible. A poem which professes to be modern and yet requires a glossary fails of one of its primary objects.'

A short passage, chosen at random, will both illustrate and refute Mackail's point. The context is the poet's praise of Beowulf's long rule as king of the Geats:

Well then did he hold it  
For a fifty of winters; then was he an old king,  
An old fatherland's warder; until one began  
Through the dark of the night-tide, a drake, to hold sway,  
In a howe high aloft watched over an hoard,  
A stone-burg full steep; thereunder a path sty'd  
Unknown unto men, and therewith wended  
Who of men do I know not; for his lust there took he,  
From the hoard of the heathen his hand took away  
A hall-bowl gem-flecked, nowise back did he give it,  
Though the herd of the hoard him sleeping beguil'd he  
With thief-craft; and then found out the king  
The best of folk-heroes, that wrath-bollen was he.

'Warder', 'tide' perhaps, 'drake', 'howe', 'sty'd', 'wended', and 'bollen' are all archaic, though most survive into Modern English in other forms. Of these words, only 'howe'
(= ‘mound, burial mound’), ‘stry’ (= ‘stride, ascend, descend’), and ‘bollen’ (= ‘swollen, angry’) make it into Morris’s glossary. But seven words in a passage of 123 is, I argue, not an overwhelming preponderance of archaisms, amounting to slightly more than 5% of the total in this passage.

The average in this passage is, moreover, fairly much that of the poem as a whole. Consider Beowulf’s famous opening lines in Morris’s rendering:

What! we of the Spear-Danes of yore days, so was it
That we learn’d of the fair fame of kings of the folks
And the Athelings a-faring in framing of valour.
Oft then Scyld the Sheaf-son from the hosts of the scathers,
From kindreds a many the mead-settles tore....

The archaic words are ‘What’ (at least in its lexical and syntactical use here), ‘yore’ (barely so, given the survival of the phrase ‘days of yore’), ‘Athelings’ (= ‘princes’), ‘sheaf’ (barely so, the problem being less the word’s meaning than how Scyld became the son of a gathering of wheat), and ‘scathers’ (= ‘enemies’). ‘Settle’ might give some archaic flavour today, but it decidedly did not in Morris’s time: remember the famous settle moved from Red Lion Square to Red House, where it yet remains.

The original for these lines reads:

Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum
beocyninga brym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!
Oft Scyld Seafing sceapena þreatum,
monegum mægðum meodosetla ofteah....

Notable are three things: first, Morris gets each of the anachronistic words from the original, and that is indeed the case for almost all of Morris’s old words in the poem. Each, though, is easily understandable in context, with the possible exception of ‘scathers’. Second, Morris’s translation is very, very accurate, with the changes due only to expansion of the original to compensate for the syntactical differences between Old and Modern English. Third, Morris’s lines are longer than those in the original. The last point not only meets a syntactical need; it also makes for a certain metrical expansiveness, in which unaccented syllables are used more frequently than in the original. In other words, Morris is using the traditional metrical feet that entered English only in the Middle English period, through the poet’s exposure to French and Latin scansion. His metrics, in short, are more modern than those of the original.

In a contemporary review, published in the Athenaeum in August of 1895, shortly after Morris’s Beowulf was published, Theodore Watts commends the work as an ‘entire success’. He notes how Morris renders the poem in ‘rhymeless alliterative verse’ — a more accurate description than Morris’s own loose ‘rhyming’. But even Watts can qualify the entirety of Morris’s success, writing, ‘Sometimes Mr. Morris does, no doubt, load the second division of the line with too many syllables, forgetting that in this respect there is a great difference between an inflected and uninflexed language’. For Watts, however much he hides it away amidst his praise, the trouble with Morris’s Beowulf is its metrics, not its vocabulary.

This brings us back to Morris’s troubling ‘gaps’. Mackail picks up this word from him, deflecting at least some of the blame for what he perceives to be the poem’s
failure' from Morris onto the defective *Beowulf-*manuscript: "The obscurity of many parts of the original, made more obscure by gaps and corruption in the text, cannot be got over...." What are these gaps? The *Beowulf-*manuscript survived the notorious fire in 1731 of Robert Cotton's famous antiquarian library, and its edges were singed, many letters and small words at the end of lines being burned away. But the Icelander Grimur Jónsson Thorkelin had made two transcriptions of the poem before the fire, and thus almost all of what was lost survives. Folio 179 of the manuscript was also damaged somehow during its copying and then written over, so there are some problems about the readings there. There are, moreover, a handful of half-lines missing through scribal error: the alliterative scheme of the contiguous lines reveals their absence. Another handful of words are also gone because of scribal oversight. That is all: the unrestored 'gaps' are minor and localized irritants, not grievous obstacles to either the understanding or the translation of the poem.

What Morris had in mind, I think, is a perceived rather than a real difficulty, based on a misunderstanding of Old English metrics. Philologists of the nineteenth-century, trained in the classics, expected a metrical system that counted unaccented syllables as well as accented ones. They were following the analogy of classical quantitative meter, based on repeating patterns of long and short syllables (the iambics, trochees, anapests, dactyls, etc.). This system was enormously helpful in understanding English poets from Chaucer onwards, for they themselves had been schooled in classical metrics – the only difference being the English language's preference for accent over quantity. Thus Eduard Sievers posited his enormously complex, enormously influential 'five types' of Old English metrical feet – a system that sounds reasonable until one realizes that there are over two dozen subtypes. What Sievers and subsequent generations of graduate students learning Old English did not realize was that Anglo-Saxon poets simply did not count unaccented syllables. The consequence is that some Old English lines are extremely short, some quite long.

Morris, like so many others of his day, perceived the shorter lines as metrically deficient because something was missing – in short, grievous gaps. What Morris did in response was to regularize the length of the lines and thus fill in the perceived gaps. Most of the lines in his rendering fall between ten and thirteen syllables, with the variation explainable by substitutions of three-syllable feet like anapests and dactyls for the normal two-syllable iambics and trochees.

To accomplish this metrical regularity Morris often inverted normal word order, as in "Though the herd of the hoard him sleeping beguil'd he/With thief-craft; and then found out the King/The best of folk-heroes, that wrath-bollen was he'. This can easily be inverted: 'He beguil'd him with thief-craft [while] sleeping, and then the king found out, the best of folk-heroes, that he was wrath-bollen'. Thus straightened out, the passage sounds less archaic. But the metrical effect Morris strives for is gone, even if all the old words are there. An uninverted Morris's *Beowulf* would become a prose work graced with old-sounding words; printed as prose it would look and sound fairly much like one of Morris's prose romances – *The Wood Beyond the World, The Well at the World's End*, or *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* – its exact contemporaries.

The metrical effect of Morris's *Beowulf* is regularity, that of the Old English *Beowulf* irregularity, surprise. One leaves a reading of Morris's work thinking and speaking in four-stress units, regular as heart-beats. It is not a pleasant effect. One
leaves a reading of the Old English *Beowulf* with the accents falling unexpectedly — perhaps as unexpectedly as a monster invading a great hall in the middle of the night. In a poem of unexpected events, unexpected reversals of fortunes, Morris's meter works to the detriment of meaning.

But the successes of Morris's *Beowulf* are also notable. Its effect on his own archaizing vocabulary in his prose romances is one of enrichment. A reading of the later prose romances, starting with *The Wood Beyond the World*, shows not a greater frequency of old words than in the earlier *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Story of the Glittering Plain* but instead a greater variety. Remember his comment to Wyatt in the letter of 10 November 1894 about not ‘hesitating to use [the archaic words] in an original poem of my own’.

More important than this suggestion, which would need computer-readable concordances of the prose romances for verification, is the very aptness of archaizing vocabulary in the poem, for the original *Beowulf* attempts in its own ways to archaize. Written perhaps in the early ninth-century (though arguments for it have run the gamut from the seventh to eleventh centuries), it depicts a fifth-century world. There is, moreover, an occasional archaizing word, like perhaps ‘wundini’ in line 1382. More important, it depicts an elegiac world in which lament for a lost past is a frequent mode: witness the Lone Survivor’s Lament in lines 2221–2277 or Wiglaf’s insistence at the end that the death of Beowulf has propelled the Geats into a violent and uncertain future. In such a poem archaizing effects in vocabulary and syntax are wholly appropriate, an intelligent artistic choice.

The achievement of balance in Morris’s *Beowulf* between accuracy and poetry may best be illustrated by counter-examples from what are arguably today’s two most widely-read versions: those by E. Talbot Donaldson and Burton Raffel. Donaldson’s is a prose rendering and very accurate, as is fitting for one of this century’s most celebrated medievalists. It was first published in 1966, and is the translation contained in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the source through which generations of sophomores first approach the poem.

Here is Donaldson’s rendering of the *Beowulf*-poet’s explanation of how Beowulf became King in Geatland:

Afterwards it happened, in later days, in the crashes of battle, when Hygelac lay dead and war-swords came to slay Heardred behind the shield-cover, when the Battle-Scefings, hard fighters, sought him among the victorious nation, attacked bitterly the nephew of Hereric — then the broad kingdom came into Beowulf’s hand.15

Here are the lines in the original:

Eft ðæt geiode ufaran dogrum
hildehlæmmum syððan Hygelac læg,
ond Heardrede hildeneceas
under bordhreðan to bonan wurdon,
ða hyne gesohtan on sigeþeode
hearde hildfrecan, Heaðo-Scilfingas
niða genægdan nefan Hereric–:
syððan Beowulf þe brade rice
on hand gehwearf.... [ll. 2200–2208a]16
Donaldson avoids archaic words, passing up possibilities in both ‘hildemeceas’ (‘battle-maces’) and ‘bonan’ (‘bane, slayer’). But Donaldson’s passage is dull: its successive appositional clauses marked by commas—accurate in rendering the original’s syntax—have the effect of distancing the reader further and further from the sentence’s ultimate meaning. This type of jog trot coupled with long, block-like paragraphs has convinced generations of sophomores that Beowulf is a dull poem.

Not so Raffel’s translation:

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead
And Herdred, his son, who’d ruled the Geats
After his father, had followed him into the darkness -
Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed
His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding
Their king – then, when Higd’s one son
Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland....

This captures much of the cloudy excitement of the original. Raffel takes care to make his verbs vigorous, while Donaldson lets his nouns carry what little action his passage has. In Raffel phrases like ‘followed him into the darkness’ and ‘cut through the soldiers surrounding/Their king’ conjure up the heroic ethos of the Germanic society, in which a thane’s primary moral injunction was to die in battle with his lord, thus investing the lines with almost mythic dignity. Raffel’s translation is not a dull read. But neither is it Beowulf, for even a cursory glance at this passage, which is typical of the whole, shows that it is at best a loose paraphrase.

Here now is Morris:

But thereafter it went so in days later worn
Through the din of the battle, sitheence Hygelac lay low
And unto Heardred swords of the battle
Under the war-board were for a bane;
When fell on him midst of this victory-folk
The hard battle-wolves, the Scylfings of war,
And by war overwhelmed the nephew of Hereric;
That sitheence unto Beowulf turned the broad realm
All unto his hand.

Notice that Morris picks up on only one of the two opportunities for an archaic word, rejecting ‘maces’ but including ‘bane’. The lines are every bit as scrupulously accurate as Donaldson’s, but they are also every bit as exciting as Raffel’s. For instance, his ‘battle-wolves’ for ‘hildfrecan’ is as accurate but much more lively than Donaldson’s ‘hard fighters’. Morris’s ‘turned the broad realm/All unto his hand’ is active, not passive as in Donaldson’s ‘then the broad kingdom came into Beowulf’s hand’ – and even more accurate a rendering of the Old English verb ‘gehwearf’.

I sit here writing this the day before a new semester at my university begins, and tomorrow I will be holding forth about Beowulf from Donaldson’s translation in one course, Raffel’s in another. I find myself wishing that Morris’s translation were out in paperback so my students in the first course could read a lively, those in the second, an accurate, Beowulf. They would all thus come closer to encountering the real poem. For all its faults, Morris’s is the best translation available.
NOTES


4. ibid., p. 353.


7. ibid., p. 362.


10. ibid., X, p. 179.


13. ibid., p. 387.


