

REVIEW: *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, by J. R. R. Tolkien. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. Pp. 448. Hardcover: \$28.00. ISBN 978-0-544-44278-8.

First, on seeing this title you may wonder if we really need another translation of *Beowulf* or more of Tolkien's unfinished work. If you're a medievalist/medievalismist, you'll have as much interest in the commentary as in the translation and additional material—*Beowulf* comprises only ninety-three pages of this substantial book, and Tolkien has cut back the translation from the original 3,182 lines of poetry to 2,665 lines of poetic prose. His approach to the act of translating differs from that of others because he apparently had a different purpose in mind. If you're a modernist/medievalismist, you'll have as much interest in the appended "Sellic Spell" and "The Lay of Beowulf" as in the prose rendering of the original. You'll also find Christopher Tolkien's editorial matter on his father's material, and his essential work as an editor becomes more and more interesting and important as a study in itself.

Second, this book gives testament to the apparently bottomless bounty of new material that rises from the Tolkien estate and, seemingly, from legend; we have heard in the old days hints of *The Fall of Arthur* and of the *Beowulf*, but now we have them, and whether or not you've read all the volumes of fully or partially restored tales, you'll probably find these recent books Tolkien essentials much like the translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Pearl* and *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Some voices have recently complained of the periodic appearance of apparent leftovers, but why not have everything we can? By reading more of Tolkien the scholar, we know more of Tolkien the man and fiction writer—we can see them all the more as inseparable. Moreover, acts of translation as well as turning early works into original fiction and poetry are also intriguing practices of criticism: we must know and understand the originals to do them.

Tolkien's translation will for many readers bring to mind that of E. Talbot Donaldson, which for years appeared in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and so provided many of us our first serious attraction to *Beowulf*. Both use prose, and while Donaldson's follows the original a little more exactly, Tolkien takes a few more poetic liberties without

aiming for alliterative verse. Tolkien begins, “Lo! The glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes in days of old we have heard tell, how those princes did deeds of valour”; Donaldson begins, “Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes’ kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds”; a little more literal if not exactly word-for-word translation may begin, “What?! We of the Spear-Danes in days of yore, of the kings of the people the glory have heard, how the noblemen did deeds of courage”—all much the same, though Tolkien plays rather more with the syntax, sometimes undeniably difficult in the original. Neither Tolkien’s nor Donaldson’s assumes the freedom of expression of Seamus Heaney’s famous and popular rendering, but both fully maintain the original sense of elegiac dignity; Donaldson’s has a touch more clarity, and Tolkien’s has more of the ritualistic feel of Old English poetry. I don’t predict Tolkien’s version will soon replace Heaney’s in the anthology, but teachers will want to provide their students access to it: it may do as good a job or better to draw students into medieval literature or at least into quality fantasy.

A few more samples will provide a sufficient taste of the translation itself. A number of lines fall into (I think) unnecessary clumsiness. One of the famous maxims, moved because of the shortening of the poem from lines 572-73 to 464-65, Tolkien supplies as “Fate oft saveth a man not doomed to die, when his valour fails not”; the original, “*Wyrð oft nereð/ unfægne eorl þonne his ellen dēah,*” we may more easily offer as “Fate [or, simply, the course of things] often preserves the undoomed (literally “unfay”) man if his courage holds (from OE *dugan*, to avail). Here is Tolkien’s 585-86 (718-19 in the OE): “Never in days of life before nor later with harder fortune guards in hall he [Grendel] found,” from *Næfre hē on aldor-dagum ær nē siþðan/ heardran hæle heal-ðegnas fand.*” One may use “He never in the elder days before nor since found worse fortune with a hall-thane” (or even, perhaps, “Neither before nor since found he a hardier hero among hall-thanes”). Beowulf seldom translates easily, so we should allow latitude, though we must debate on how much. In another case, meeting a “knight” at Hrothgar’s hall-door (I’m always wary of the word *knight* in an Anglo-Saxon context, as it seems to me anachronistic), Beowulf prepares to speak, and Tolkien’s narrator proceeds thus (lines 275-77, 340-42 in the original): “To him,

then, strong and bold, the proud prince of the Windloving folk replied, words he spake in answer, stern beneath his helm.” Now that may seem like a toss-off passage, not really important, but Tolkien gives it a healthy rhythm and metaphorical power akin to that of the poet, who wasted few words. A more literal approach—“The valor-famed one answered him, proud leader of the folk of the Weathers, spoke then a word, hardy under [his] helm”—may do as well, but no better. We find Tolkien working for the right feel of the passage, just as he does in the formal dialogue in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*.

“Sellic Spell,” which encapsulates the Grendel and Grendel’s Mother episodes in thirty-one quick pages, captures the feel of Tolkienian fairy story. Probably from the early 1940s (page 359), it follows “Beowulf” from the time a king recovers him from a bear’s den in his infancy through his fights with “Grinder” and his dam and his return home to give his king all the gold he gets from the monster’s cave, and it concludes with a brief hint of the successes of his adult life. “The Lay of Beowulf” appears in a shorter and a longer version, both in rhyming eight-line stanzas and apparently intended by the author for singing. Lovers of Tolkien’s poetry will find there what they seek: great attention to details of sound enhancing the heroic narrative of Beowulf’s battle with Grendel.

For me, as I’ve mentioned above, the most interesting and productive part of the volume comes in the more than two hundred pages of commentary assembled by Christopher Tolkien from his father’s notes and apparently intended as lecture material for his students to illuminate difficult passages in the poem. The Commentary includes brief interventions by CRT to address manuscript issues or to add snippets from JRRT’s other notes or fiction, plus occasional asides of JRRT’s own, such as a bit on the ship-burial and some implications of the term *Scedeland* (which we normally translate as Scandinavia or Northern Lands). Perhaps I should feel embarrassed to say I don’t always agree with what I find. To say that to translate *hronrád* as “whale-road” is “quite incorrect” seems to me a bit brusque. As with any metaphor, what sounds “bizarre” or industrial to one reader may sound apt and natural to another; “dolphin’s riding” has a nice English lilt, but dolphins tend to warmer waters—a more zoologically correct “porpoise path” sounds to

my ear a little funny. Tolkien believed that the use of name *Beowulf* for the son of Scyld resulted from an alteration of *Beow*, and a “purposeless” one at that; again, I don’t agree in that I wouldn’t call the choice purposeless—if indeed an alteration occurred—as the comparison of the two Beowulfs makes for interesting discussion. For instance, the eponymous hero is an ideal hero and a good king, while the secondary figure was a good son and perhaps even a better king: he too had a son who successfully replaced him, while no dynasty follows Beowulf the Geat. On the other hand, Tolkien’s uncovering the name of abbot Biulf in the Durham *Liber Vitae* and his discussions of the name *Healfdene* and of the words *féond*, *fæhb*, and *hel-rún* exemplify typical Tolkienian clear, brilliant philology. I don’t think scholarly readers will (or need) agree with all of the Commentary, but neither does that matter; the important thing is that we have it for consideration, to learn from and to ponder. I think they will find “Sellic Spell” and the lays acute scholarship: they show ways of looking at the *Beowulf* that inspire creative responses and that illuminate the poem from the perspective of fairy story and lyrical antiphon.

Summary questions for the reader: will this volume enhance your knowledge and appreciation of Tolkien as scholar/writer? will it add to your understanding and appreciation of *Beowulf*? will it replace your favorite translation of Beowulf for reading pleasure or for teaching, or is it just worth reading anyway for its own sake? Suggested answers: probably, almost certainly, probably no, and yes . . . Why did Tolkien not publish this work himself? I suspect that with all the work he had to do, he simply never got back to completing it to his satisfaction and that, given the availability of other translations, he thought his own not as important or rewarding as the writing on which he spent more time. As he always did, he has, even without intending, left us much to enjoy, ponder, and discuss.

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