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Slaying Monsters

Tolkien's "Beowulf."

BY JOAN ACOCELLA



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In the nineteen-twenties, there were probably few people better qualified to translate "Beowulf" than J. R. R. (John Ronald Reuel) Tolkien. He had learned Old English and started reading the poem at an early age. He loved "Beowulf" and would declaim passages of it to the private literary club that he had founded with his schoolmates. "Hwæt!" ("Lo!") he would begin. (He did the same, later, as a professor, at the beginning of Old English classes. Some of the students thought "Hwæt!" meant "Quiet!") He also loved stories, especially medieval ones, with lots of wayfaring and dragon-slaying—activities prominent in his books "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings." In 1920, he began teaching Old English at the University of Leeds. He needed money—by now he had a wife and children—and he supplemented his income by marking examination



Tolkien finished his translation of the poem in 1926, at the age of thirty-four. Then he put it in a drawer and never published it.

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFFREY ALAN LOVE

papers. Anyone could have told him that he should translate “Beowulf.” How this would have advanced his reputation! Finally, he sat down and did it. He finished the translation in 1926, at the age of thirty-four. Then he put it in a drawer and never published it. Now, forty years after his death, his son Christopher has brought it out (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). It is a thrill.

“Beowulf” was most likely written in Britain—by whom, we don’t know—in around the eighth century. (That is Tolkien’s date. Some scholars put it later.) The plot is simple and exalted. Beowulf is a prince of the Geats, a tribe living in what is now southern Sweden. He is peerlessly noble, brave, and strong. Each of his hands has a grip equal to that of thirty men. He is alone in the world; he was an orphan, and he never acquires a wife or children. Partly for that reason—because he has no one to behave toward in an intimate way—he has no real psychology. Unlike Anna Karenina or Huckleberry Finn, he is not a filter, a point of view, standing between us and his world.

This self-consciousness gives that world a sparkling vividness. Here are Beowulf and his men, after a journey, sailing back to Geatland (this and all uncredited translations are by Tolkien):

Forth sped the bark troubling the deep waters and forsook the land of the Danes. Then upon the mast was the raiment of the sea, the sail, with rope made fast. The watery timbers groaned. Nought did the wind upon the waves keep her from her course as she rode the billows. A traveller upon the sea she fared, fleeting on with foam about her throat over the waves, over the ocean-streams with wreathed prow, until they might espy the Geatish cliffs and headlands that they knew. Urged by the airs up drove the bark. It rested upon the land.

The boat must have been enormous—it carries Beowulf and what seems to have been at least a dozen knights, plus their horses, their battle gear, and heaps of treasure. The timbers groan. Yet the boat fairly flies, gathering a necklace of sea foam. Then, suddenly, the men see the cliffs of their homeland and, mirroring their eagerness, the boat lands in five short words.

That passage is speed incarnate. Others, many others, are portraits of dark or light,

such as the description of dinnertime at Heorot, the King of Denmark's mead hall:

There was the sound of harp and the clear singing of the minstrel; there spake he that had knowledge to unfold from far-off days the first beginning of men, telling how the Almighty wrought the earth, a vale of bright loveliness that the waters encircle; how triumphant He set the radiance of the sun and moon as a light for the dwellers in the lands.

But outside the hall there lurks a monster, Grendel. Grendel hates music, and for twelve years he has been coming to Heorot after dark, to prey on the Danish knights. The poet describes one of Grendel's visits:

The door at once sprang back, barred with forged iron, when claws he laid on it. He wrenched then wide, baleful with raging heart, the gaping entrance of the house; then swift on the bright-patterned floor the demon paced. In angry mood he went, and from his eyes stood forth most like to flame unholy light. He in the house espied there many a man asleep, a throng of kinsmen side by side, and band of youthful knights. Then his heart laughed.

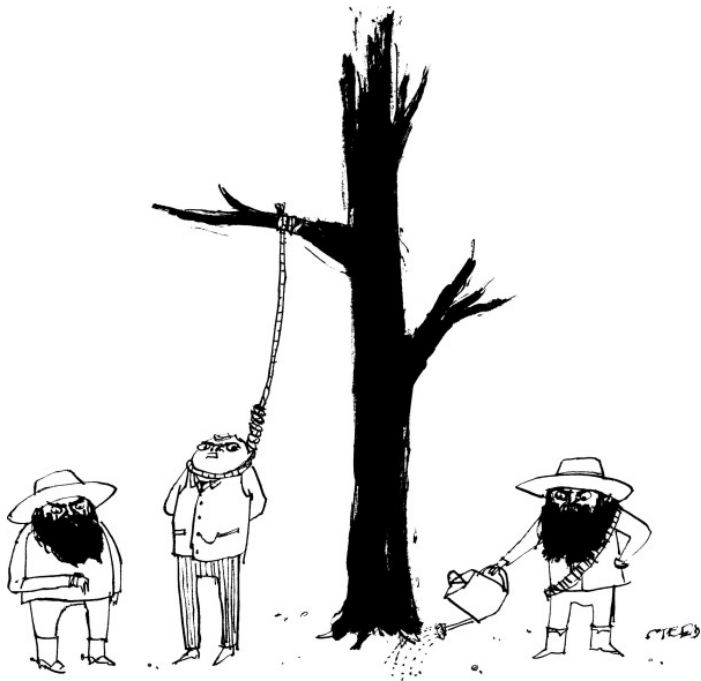
He seized one sleeping man, "biting the bone-joints, drinking blood from veins, great gobbets gorging down. Quickly he took all of that lifeless thing to be his food, even feet and hands." How lovely, the bright-patterned floor. How appalling, Grendel's dinner.

"Beowulf" is the story of the hero's defeat of three successive monsters. The first is Grendel. The Geats are allies of the Danes, and Beowulf, who by then seems to be about thirty, decides to go to Denmark and rid it of this menace. It is hard to say what Grendel looks like. He is apparently about four times the size of a man. He has claws; he does not speak. But he also has human qualities. He has to enter Heorot by a door. When wounded, he bleeds, as Beowulf soon discovers. With his powerful hands, the hero grabs Grendel's wrist and tears off his arm and shoulder. His shoulder! He then hangs the whole business—shoulder, arm, hand—from the rafters. Imagine the Danish knights drinking their mead as half of Grendel's torso drips blood onto them. Grendel is the most real of the monsters. (It means something that he

is the only one of the three who has a name.) As Seamus Heaney, another “Beowulf” translator, has written, Grendel “comes alive in the reader’s imagination as a kind of dog-breath in the dark.” Almost with embarrassment, you pity him somewhat. (Tolkien describes how, after the fight with Beowulf, Grendel, “sick at heart,” dragged himself home, “bleeding out his life.”) He is also a bit childlike. It is no surprise that John Gardner, in his 1971 novel “Grendel,” portrays the monster as a boy.

One reason Grendel seems childlike is that he has a mother. When her son comes home to die, Grendel’s mother goes on a rampage. So Beowulf must suit up again. The mother lives in a chamber below a stinking swamp: “The water surged with gore, with blood yet hot.” Beowulf dives right in, with his helmet on. His knights, afraid to join him, stand at the edge of the water. Grendel’s mother is waiting for him—with helpers, a gang of sea monsters, which tear at him with their tusks, to soften him up. Finally, she takes over. Demon or not, she clearly loved her son, and she goes at Beowulf with a blinding fury. The hero finds that his famous—and previously invincible—sword, Hrunting, is of no use against her plated hide. It bounces off her. But he sees, close by, another sword, forged by giants, which no man can pick up—except him. He waves it through the air, piercing the monster’s throat and breaking her neck bone. This is more horrid even than Beowulf’s removal of Grendel’s arm and shoulder, or, at least, it feels more painful. (It also shows a man killing a woman.) Before he leaves the den, Beowulf beheads Grendel’s corpse, lying nearby. Normally, the poet says, it would have taken four men to pick up that head. But Beowulf carries it alone, to the surface, and hands it to his knights. When they get back to the mead hall, they tug it around by its hair, as a game.

Beowulf’s third fight, which takes place back home, in Geatland, is with a dragon, who, unlike Grendel and his mother, is less a monster than a symbol. He is not sad or weird. Indeed, he is rather glamorous. He is fifty feet long and breathes fire. He has wings—he



“O.K., I’ll talk.”
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can fly—and he doesn’t live in a nasty fen. He has a nice cave, where he guards a treasure that has been his for three hundred years, and which he feels strongly about. But now someone has come and stolen a jewelled cup. This enrages him, and he begins incinerating the Geatish countryside.

Many years have passed since Beowulf killed Grendel and his mother. He has become the King of the Geats and ruled them for fifty years. He is about eighty years old now, and tired. Still, to protect his people he must eliminate this menace. He sets out, but “heavy was his mood.” Speaking to his knights, he reviews his great deeds. He bids them farewell. In what is probably the poem’s most iconic image, he goes and sits on a promontory that juts out over the sea. (This says everything. Beowulf will soon be part of nature—the land, the sea.) As always, he insists on going into the contest alone. His knights, relieved, slink off into the forest. The dragon emerges from the cave, “blazing, gliding in loopéd curves.” Beowulf brings his huge sword down on the monster’s body, but, as with Grendel’s mother, it doesn’t make a dent. The dragon sinks his teeth into the hero’s neck. His blood “welled forth in gushing streams.”

Will he lose the fight? No. Not all his men ran into the forest. One young knight, Wiglaf, stayed and, unbeknownst to the King, followed him close behind. Seeing Beowulf wounded, Wiglaf rushes forth and stabs the dragon “a little lower down.” As the poet is too polite to say, Wiglaf took better aim than Beowulf did, and thus

weakened the dragon to the point where the old man could go in for the kill. Beowulf has not lost his touch: “he ripped up the serpent.” That’s the end of the dragon—the Geatish knights unceremoniously dump the body over a cliff—but it’s also the end of Beowulf. Wiglaf unclasps the King’s helmet, and bathes his wounds, to no avail. In the final lines of the poem, we see the knights, in tears, riding their horses in a circle around Beowulf’s tomb. “Thus bemoaned the Geatish folk their master’s fall, comrades of his hearth, crying that he was ever of the kings of earth of men most generous and to men most gracious, to his people most tender and for praise most eager.”

Tolkien may have put away his translation of “Beowulf,” but about a decade later he published a paper that many people regard as not just the finest essay on the poem but one of the finest essays on English literature. This is “‘Beowulf’: The Monsters and the Critics.” Tolkien preferred the monsters to the critics. In his view, the meaning of the poem had been ignored in favor of archeological and philological study. How much of “Beowulf” was fact, and how much fancy? What was its relationship to recent archeological finds?

Tolkien saw all this as an evasion of the poem’s true subject: death, defeat, which come not only to Beowulf but to his kingdom, and every kingdom. Many critics, Tolkien says, consider “Beowulf” to be something of a mess, artistically—for example, in its mixing of pagan with Christian ideas. But the narrator of “Beowulf” repeatedly says that, like the minstrels who entertain the knights, he is telling a tale from the old days. “I have heard,” he says. “I have learned.” Tolkien claims that the events of the poem, insofar as they are real, occurred in about 500 A.D. But the poet was a man of the new days, when the British Isles were being converted to Christianity. It didn’t happen overnight. And so, while he tells how God girded the earth with the seas, and hung the sun in the sky, he again and again reverts to pagan values. None of the people in the poem care anything about modesty, simplicity (they adore treasure, they count it up), or humility (they boast of their valorous deeds). And death is regarded as final. No one, including Beowulf, is said to be going on to a better place.

Another aspect of “Beowulf” that critics seeking a tidier poem deplore is the

constant switching of time planes: the time-very-past, in which a noble tribe created the treasure that becomes the dragon's hoard; the times-less-past (there are several), in which we are told of the greatness and the downfall of legendary kings and heroes; the time-present, in which Beowulf kills the monsters; the time-future, when other peoples, hearing of Beowulf's death, will make bold to move against the Geats, and will conquer them, pressing them into slavery. Geatish maidens scream as they imagine it. They know that it will come to pass. This is like something out of "The Trojan Women."

As the time planes collide, spoilers proliferate. When Beowulf goes to meet the dragon, the poet tells us fully four times that the hero is going to die. As in Greek tragedy, the audience for the poem knew the ending. It knew the middle, too, which is a good thing, since the events of Beowulf's fifty-year reign are barely mentioned until the dragon appears. This bothered many early commentators. It did not bother Tolkien. The three fights were enough. Beowulf, Tolkien writes in his essay, was just a man:

And that for him and many is sufficient tragedy. It is not an irritating accident that the tone of the poem is so high and its theme so low. It is the theme in its deadly seriousness that begets the dignity of tone: *lif is læne: eal scæceð leoht and lif somod* (life is transitory: light and life together hasten away). So deadly and ineluctable is the underlying thought, that those who in the circle of light, within the besieged hall, are absorbed in work or talk and do not look to the battlements, either do not regard it or recoil. Death comes to the feast.

According to Tolkien, "Beowulf" was not an epic or a heroic lay, which might need narrative thrust. It was just a poem—an elegy. Light and life hasten away.

Few people—indeed, few literary scholars—can read "Beowulf" in the original Old English. Most of them can barely refer to it. The characters in the Iliad and the Odyssey, poems that were written down more than a millennium before "Beowulf," are known even to people who haven't read their source. Achilles, Hector: in some parts of the world, babies are given these names. But people do not know the names of the characters in "Beowulf," and, if they did, they still wouldn't know how to pronounce them: Heorowearð,

Ecgtheow, Daeghrefn. That is because Old English, as the standard language of the Anglo-Saxons, preceded the Norman invasion, in 1066, when the French, and their Latinate language, conquered England. Here are the lines, at the opening of “Beowulf,” that Tolkien used to shout out to his literary club:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

This sounds more like German than like English. If you don’t know German, it doesn’t sound like anything at all.

Old English did not become an object of academic study until the mid-nineteenth century, and by that time there was little chance of its being included, with Greek and Latin, as a requirement in university curricula. Also, little of the surviving Old English literature is artistically comparable to what Greece and Rome produced. In consequence, it was treated as a sidelong matter. In Tolkien’s time, Oxford required that students specializing in English literature know the language well enough to be able to read, and translate from, the first half of “Beowulf.” That is why Tolkien had a job: at Oxford, for decades, he taught the first half of “Beowulf.”

Then, there were the conventions of Old English poetry. “Beowulf” does not rhyme at the ends of its lines, and it doesn’t have a rhythm as regular as, say, Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter. Instead, each line has a caesura, or a division in the middle, and the two halves of the line are linked by alliteration. (Look at the opening line that Tolkien recited to his literary club: “Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum.”) The pattern of the consonants creates the stresses, and thereby the rhythm.

What is the modern translator to do with this? It is hard, in discussing Tolkien’s translation, not to compare it with Seamus Heaney’s famous 2000 version.



“Don’t forget your gunfighting helmet.”

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Heaney was a poet by trade—indeed, a Nobel laureate in literature—and to him it would probably have been unthinkable to translate “Beowulf” as anything but verse. He also chose to obey the “Beowulf” poet’s prosody: the caesura, the alliteration. As for tone, he says that the language of “Beowulf” reminded him of his family’s native Gaelic: solemn, “big voiced.” This magniloquence, it seems to me, is the leading edge, linguistically, of Heaney’s poem. It is an Irish-sounding translation, and he wanted it that way.

To achieve all this, he had to make some compromises. Consider the lines where Tolkien shows us Grendel eating a knight. The monster seizes the man, “biting the bone-joints, drinking blood from veins, great gobbets gorging down. Quickly he took all of that lifeless thing to be his food, even feet and hands.” In Heaney’s translation, the monster, picking up the knight,

bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
utterly lifeless, eaten up
hand and foot.

Here, for the sake of alliteration and rhythm, we lose, among other things, the great gobbets (what a phrase!), the idea of using a man as food, and, most unfortunately, the picture of Grendel eating the feet and hands. Heaney’s “hand

and foot” seems to mean just that Grendel went from the top of the man to the bottom. We don’t have to imagine, as we do in Tolkien’s translation, the monster crunching on the little bones and the cartilage—harder to swallow, no doubt, than the “great gobbets.” We’re forced to think about what it would be like to eat a man.

These same problems arise from line to line. Heaney, to his credit, took responsibility for this poem, and turned it into something that regular people would want to read, and enjoy. (Who knew that a translation of a poem more than a thousand years old, about people killing dragons, could reach the top of the *Times* best-seller list?) In the words of Andrew Motion, in the *Financial Times*, Heaney “made a masterpiece out of a masterpiece.” I have no doubt that Heaney grieved over some of the choices he had to make, but by his rules he had to act as an artist, create a new poem. This is the sacrifice always made in a “free” translation. To help those who could read Old English, he reproduced the original on facing pages.

Tolkien, though he wrote poetry, did not consider himself primarily a poet, and his “Beowulf” is a prose translation. In the words of Christopher Tolkien, his father “determined to make a translation as close as he could to the exact meaning in detail of the Old English poem, far closer than could ever be attained by translation into ‘alliterative verse,’ but with some suggestion of the rhythm of the original.” In fact, the alliteration is there throughout. Consequently, you can tap out the rhythm, with your foot, line by line. But Tolkien doesn’t insist on any of this.

Such acts of faithfulness do not necessarily make his poem more accessible to the modern reader than Heaney’s free translation. Especially because Tolkien reproduces the “Beowulf” poet’s inversions (“Didst thou for Hrothgar king renowned in any wise amend his grief so widely noised?”), his translation is probably harder to read. But you get used to the inversions; you can understand the sentence even if you have to read it twice. And what is won by the archaism—or just by the willingness to sound strange, as in the “feet and hands”—is a rare immediacy.

Why did Tolkien never publish his “Beowulf”? It could be said that he didn’t have the time. As he was finishing his translation, he got the appointment at Oxford and had to move his family. Such a disruption can put a writer off his feed. A few years later, he began “The Hobbit,” which, with its three sequels, in “The Lord of the Rings,” took up many of his remaining healthy years. It has also been argued, by Tolkien’s very sympathetic biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, that he was too much of a perfectionist to let the poem go. Christopher Tolkien, in the introduction to “Beowulf,” says that, in editing, the typescript he worked from—and this was a “clean” copy, a retyping from preceding marked-up copies—was full of changes, plus marginal notes as to other, possible changes. Christopher also supplies a commentary consisting of Tolkien’s lectures on “Beowulf” and the notes he wrote to himself before and after the lectures. This material, which Christopher says he cut substantially, is longer than the poem: two hundred and seventeen pages, as opposed to ninety-three. So although Tolkien told his publisher in 1926 that he had finished the translation, he went on fiddling with it for a long time. When he published “The Hobbit,” in 1937, a number of his colleagues said to him, “Now we know what you have been doing all these years!” But he wasn’t just writing “The Hobbit.” He hadn’t stopped working on “Beowulf.”

Was this really due primarily to perfectionism? “Beowulf” was by no means Tolkien’s only translation from Old English, and he gave a number of them, such as “Pearl” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” the same treatment that he gave “Beowulf.” Both “Pearl” and “Sir Gawain” were actually set in print, but Tolkien could not bring himself to write the introductions, and so the contracts lapsed. Nor should it be thought that Tolkien’s problem was that he feared criticism from other scholars of Old English. “The Hobbit,” too, though it was not an academic enterprise, was laid aside for years, until a representative of the publisher George Allen & Unwin went to Oxford to see Tolkien, borrowed the typescript, read it, and prevailed upon him to complete it.

Another possible explanation for Tolkien’s putting “Beowulf” aside—a theory that has been advanced in the case of many unpublished manuscripts—is that the work was so important to him that if he finished it his life, or the life of his mind,

would be over. I think this makes some sense. “Beowulf” was Tolkien’s lodestar. Everything he did led up to or away from it. This idea suggests another. Tolkien was a serious philologist from the time he was a child. He and his cousin Mary had a private language, Nevbosh, and wrote limericks in it. One of their efforts went:

Dar fys ma vel gom co palt “Hoc
 Pys go iskili far maino woc?
 Pro si go fys do roc de
 Do cat ym maino bocte
 De volt fact soc ma taimful gyroc!”

(“There was an old man who said ‘How / Can I possibly carry my cow? / For if I were to ask it / To get in my basket / It would make such a terrible row!’”) Later, he made up a private alphabet, and then another, to use in writing his diary.

As an adult, Tolkien could read many languages—and he made up more, including Elvish—but the number is not the point. Even in secondary school, Carpenter says, “Tolkien had started to look for the bones, the elements that were common to them all.” Or, in the words of C. S. Lewis, his closest friend, for a time, in adulthood, he had been *inside* language. Perhaps he couldn’t come back out. By this I don’t mean that he couldn’t talk to his wife or his postman, but that Old English, or at least that of “Beowulf,” was where he was happiest. He knew how it worked, he loved its ways: how the words joined and separated, what came after what. Old English is where he spent most of the day, in his reading, writing, and teaching. He might have come to think that this language was better than our modern one. The sympathy may have gone even deeper. Like Beowulf, Tolkien was an orphan. (He was taken in by his grandparents.) He grew up in the West Midlands, and said that the “Beowulf” poet, too, was probably from there. He did not have difficulty living in a world of images and symbols. (He was a Catholic from childhood.) He liked golden treasure and coiled dragons. Perhaps, in the dark of night, he already knew what would happen: that he would never publish his beautiful “Beowulf,” and that his intimacy with the poem, more beautiful, would remain between him and the poet—a secret love. ♦