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Wendy Harding, Anne Mathieu

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Wendy Harding et Anne Mathieu
 Université de Montpellier III

Re-creation or Recreation in Translations of *Beowulf*
(lines 702b-736a)¹

The selection of a translation of *Beowulf* for the Agrégation prompted us to compare a variety of *Beowulf* translations with the Old English text in a series of monthly seminars at Montpellier III.² Our aim in choosing a limited number of the many available translations and concentrating on a series of short passages was to examine the different ways in which these translations initiate twentieth century readers to Anglo-Saxon poetry and culture. Such an exercise immediately demonstrates the fallacy of the old notion that the translator can extract the sense from the original work of literature and reproduce it in a new form. An analysis of the original Old English passages — our source passages — showed that sense is indissociable from form. Moreover, our study of the chosen translations showed how each translator produced a new text whose form was inextricable from its sense. It seemed more useful to understand the translations in terms of two opposite tendencies: on

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1. Communication présentée à l'atelier « Moyen Age » du XXXIX^e congrès de la SAES à Chambéry en 1999.
 2. We thank all the participants in these seminars, especially Charles Whitworth and Jean-Marie Maguin, who generously invited us to meet in the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Élisabéthaines, and Jacky Martin, whose expertise in translation theory enhanced the discussion. Thanks also to the MA-REN-BAR (Moyen Age, Renaissance, Age Baroque) research team for welcoming us as members and for supporting our projects on medieval English literature and culture.

the one hand, orientation toward the source text and the Anglo-Saxon culture it speaks of and to; or, on the other hand, orientation toward the target language and culture, the language and culture of the modern anglophone audience. Taking up the theme of the 1999 SAES Conference — "Création, récréation, récréation", we could distinguish between translation as re-creation and translation as recreation, the former endeavouring to be faithful to the values and structures of the source, and the latter attempting to produce a text that the target audience can enjoy without the challenge of encountering the alien.³ This opposition need not be an either or proposition. An inclination toward one pole can inflect the translation in a certain direction without excluding the other. In this paper, we will examine four of the available translations of *Beowulf*, two proclaiming a penchant for re-creation (Gummere⁴ and Donaldson⁵) and two for recreation (Greenfield⁶ and Wright⁷). We will

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3. These orientations approximate those described by Schleiermacher as "bringing the reader to the author" or "bringing the author to the reader" in F. Schleiermacher, *Sämtliche Werke*, cited in Antoine Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984, p. 15, by Berman as "sourciers" or "ciblistes", in Antoine Berman, *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*, Paris: Gallimard, 1995, p. 16, or by Venuti as "foreignizing" or "domesticating", in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 20.
 4. Francis B. Gummere (ed.), *The Oldest English Epic. Beowulf, Finnsburg, Waldere, Deor, Widsith, and the German Hildebrand*, New York: Macmillan, 1909, reprinted in Charles W. Eliot (ed.), *The Five-Foot Shelf of Books*, Cambridge, Mass. (The Harvard Classics, 49), 1910. In the preface to his translation, Gummere claims that "No greater mistake exists than to suppose that the rhythm and style of these early English poems cannot be rendered adequately in English speech" (p. 19).
 5. Joseph F. Tuso (ed.), *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation, Background and Sources, Criticism*, New York / London: W.W. Norton, 1975. Donaldson (p. xiii) states that "the chief purpose of this translation is to try to preserve for the reader what the translator takes to be the most striking characteristic of the style of the original: extraordinary richness of rhetorical elaboration alternating with — often combined with — the barest simplicity of

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compare the failures and successes of the two approaches as well as the respective merits of the four translators.

For the purposes of comparison, we have selected the passage describing Grendel's approach to Heorot (lines 702b-736a).⁸ This much-admired piece (Chickering calls it "one of the finest passages in Old English poetry")⁹ provides a good test of translation practice because, having been extensively praised and commented upon, it poses challenges of which translators are necessarily aware.¹⁰ We

statement. [...] In order to reproduce this effect, it has seemed best to translate as literally as possible, confining oneself to the linguistic and intellectual structure of the original."

6. Stanley B. Greenfield (trans.), *A Readable Beowulf: The Old English Epic Newly Translated*, Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982. Greenfield's translation contains no authorial statement, but his intention to provide readers with recreation is proclaimed in his title.
7. David Wright (trans.), *Beowulf: A Prose Translation with an Introduction*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957. Wright defines his goal as translator as the transmission of the story; for him, the Old English poetic style is a distraction: "It has been my aim not to distract the reader's attention from the story that is presented by the poet of *Beowulf* by attempting to recreate his allusive use of language. The Anglo-Saxon *scop* was able to employ a highly formalized and artificial diction because his audience was trained and accustomed to that kind of idiom. But his translator must remember that he is a writer of contemporary English prose competing with other writers of contemporary English prose for the attention of his readers" (pp. 24-25).
8. See the Appendix for the original Old English text and the four translations.
9. Howell D. Chickering, *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1997, p. 306.
10. See in particular Adeline Courtney Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1935, p. 50; A.G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959, pp. 88-92; Stanley B. Greenfield, "Grendel's Approach to Heorot: Syntax and Poetry", in : Robert P. Creed (ed.), *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, Providence: Brown University Press, 1967, pp. 275-84; Alain Renoir, "Point of View and Design for Terror in *Beowulf*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 63 (1962), pp. 154-67.

shall begin our investigation by analysing some of these challenges, which we have classified as musical, structural, and stylistic.

First we will look at the extent to which our translators have re-created the music of the text, — the alliteration and the verbal echoes. A translation which aims at re-creation should approximate the alliterative pattern of the original text. Alliteration matters not only at the aesthetic level, but also at the semantic level. Two examples will serve to illustrate the link between sound and meaning. First, in line 703, the alliterative couple, *sceadu-genga / sceotend*, establishes a fatal connection between the would-be murderer and his victims. This alliteration is re-created by Gummere and Donaldson only, both of whom choose to alliterate "walker" and "warriors". Another example is the alliteration between *reced* and *rinc*, which occurs twice, first in line 720 and again in line 728. This pairing recalls a principle which is basic to Anglo-Saxon heroic culture — the indissociability of warrior and hall. In line 720, *rinc* refers to Grendel, and the alliteration underscores his exclusion, as he is deprived of the joys of the hall, *dreamum bedaeled* (line 721). In line 728, *rinca* refers to the Geats, and the alliteration emphasises their integration in society, as they are peacefully sleeping after feasting in the hall. Gummere re-creates both the music and the semantic link in line 728 with "hall" and "hero-band", but not in line 720 with "house" and "warrior". Donaldson has no alliteration for these lines. Greenfield re-creates the alliteration but not the semantic link in line 720 with "door" / "demon". His line 728 does not alliterate and the term *rinc* is translated differently from line 720, as "men", not "demon". Wright approximates the alliteration in line 720 only, with "unhappy" and "Heorot", but drops the semantic link. We can see that none of the translators systematically renders the alliteration. The source text's manipulation of sound patterns to enhance the contrast between the warriors included in the *comitatus* and the outcast Grendel is not re-created. Gummere comes closest to re-establishing the link between sound and meaning. The other three translators prefer to emphasize the alienness of Grendel's nature.

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Wright goes the furthest, producing an effect of horror by translating the phrase *syþðan he hire folmum [æthr]an* (line 722b), as "at the touch of his talons". He transforms Grendel's human hand (*folm*) into monstrous claws, giving his translation of *rinc* as "creature" the connotation that the word has in modern horror films.

Turning now to verbal echoes, we take as our example the word *reced*, which occurs five times in the passage (lines 704, 714, 720, 724, and 728). This repetition works to unify the text and to emphasise the hall as the center of the action and the focus of Grendel's obsession. Gummere employs three different and rather heterogeneous nouns: twice "hall", once "palace" and twice "house". Donaldson translates *reced* once as "house", and four times as "hall". Greenfield also translates it four times as "hall", and once as "door" (in the alliterating example already mentioned). Wright uses "hall" three times, once "Heorot", and once "building". None of the translators respects the text's system of echoes throughout. To differing degrees, all the target texts sacrifice verbal echo for the sake of lexical variety. In terms of the music of the text, then, the translators choose to recreate the reader with varied sounds, rather than re-create the repetitive phonic structures of the Old English.

Now we move to the architecture of the text to see whether the translators reproduce its structural features. The text is framed by two half-lines, line 702b and 736a, which both contain a prepositional phrase with the noun *niht*, thus associating Grendel with the terrors of darkness. This repetition, seemingly easy to re-create, seems to be purposely avoided by Gummere, who translates *niht* first as "night" and second as "evening". The other translators re-create the structure, but only Greenfield preserves the original placement of the word *niht* at the end of the last sentence.¹¹ A second envelope pattern is formed by half-lines 706a, *þæt hie ne moste*, and 735a, *þæt he ma moste*. Thus Grendel's arrival at Heorot is

11. Indeed, Greenfield expresses the horror of night even more strongly than the source text by turning *sceadu-genga* into "death's shadow".

bracketed by the reassurance that his actions will be frustrated by God's providential design. None of the translators re-create this structure. Perhaps this envelope pattern is more difficult to render because it is made up of grammatical, and not of lexical words.

A second structural feature is the incremental pattern which was pointed out by Adeline Courtney Bartlett¹² and extensively commented on by other critics.¹³ This incremental pattern divides the passage into at least three blocks (lines 702b to 709, lines 710 to 719, and lines 720 to 727),¹⁴ the beginning of each block being marked by a structure composed of *com* followed by a prepositional phrase and, in varied order, a subject, and an infinitive expressing movement. This incremental structure is attempted by Gummere as well as Greenfield, who antepose the prepositional phrase instead of the verb, although they do not systematically translate *com* with the same verb. Greenfield chooses to conflate the verb *com* and the infinitive into three different verbs of movement, "swept", "glided", and "strode", which re-create the semantic variety of the infinitives but not the obsessive repetition of the main verb. Thus his Grendel has more spontaneity of movement and less of the relentless drive of the Old English one. Donaldson, by contrast, uses the form "came" followed by a gerund three times, but otherwise chooses not to preserve the parallel order of the three structures. Wright seems to make a deliberate effort to avoid syntactic parallelism, by varying the order of the elements. In fact, in the last two blocks, he chooses to

12. Bartlett, p. 50.

13. See Brodeur, Greenfield and Renoir, cited above.

14. Not all critics agree on the tripartite division. Renoir argues for a quadripartite organization of the passage, structured by the repetition of verbs of motion, *com* in lines 702, 710 and 720 and *wod* in line 714 (Renoir, p. 159). Greenfield divides the passage into four sections, "the first three marked by the varied *com* verses, the last by *geseah* (728a)" (Renoir, p. 277).

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begin the sentence with the subject, conforming to the natural order of contemporary English prose.

The fact that neither of the two prose translations preserves the structural patterns of the original can be easily accounted for. These structural patterns are perhaps the feature of the poem most foreign to the aesthetics of contemporary English prose fiction, which considers lexical and syntactic redundancy to be faults of style. The two versified translations, on the other hand, have more liberty to re-create the structure of the source text.

Finally, we turn to the style of the poem to examine the poet's use of the appositive and variational techniques. The passage illustrates the paratactic style which characterises Old English poetry. There are few subordinate clauses and the text mostly consists in an accumulation of independent clauses placed in juxtaposition. Consider lines 716b-719b:

Ne wæs þæt forma sið
 þæt he Hroþgares ham gesohte;
 næfre he on aldordagum ær ne siþðan
 heardran hæle, healðegnas fand.

The juxtaposition of these two negative sentences, similar in form, underscores the contrast in content. The usual success of Grendel's expedition is set against the disaster that is about to ensue. Because of the lack of a logical connective between the two sentences, the reader's participation is strongly engaged in the construction of meaning, and hence the force of the contrast is all the greater. Donaldson captures the stark effectiveness of the source text by reproducing this appositive structure. The other translators choose not to re-create the simple juxtaposition, preferring instead to explicitate the logical link by the use of "yet" (Gummere) or "but" (Greenfield and Wright). By doing so, they facilitate the reader's understanding but diminish his emotional involvement.

The second feature of style, variation, is illustrated in lines 728-730a,

Geseah he in recede rinca manige,
 swefan sibbedriht samod ætgædere,
 magorinca heap.

In this passage we see Grendel seeing the warriors. In the triple variation (*rinca manige*, *sibbedriht*, *magorinca heap*), the monster seem to linger over this initial sight of the Geats, savoring the pleasure of the anticipated feast. At the same time, the poet emphasises the unity (*sibbedriht samod ætgædere*) and youth (*magorinca*) of the warriors, giving an idealised picture of the *comitatus*. Three of the translators reproduce the triple variation, neatly separating the three different substantives, as is done in the source text. Wright, however, conflates the three variations into one unit "a great band of brothers in arms", accelerating the narrative moment, but reducing the effect of a tableau. Narrative economy is gained, but psychological depth is lost.

It would be easy to reproach each of the translators for what his work fails to do. However, it seems best to adopt a tolerant attitude, since no single translation can capture all the wealth of previous translations and commentaries on the poem. The sheer quantity of *Beowulf* translations should be seen not as a sign of the inadequacy of its translators or of translation in general, but as a testimony to the richness of the poem. Bad poems are simply not translated. The two orientations we have discussed each have their rewards. Translations which aim at re-creation enrich the target culture by importing other aesthetic forms and cultural values. Indeed, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the efforts of translators to re-create the poetry of *Beowulf* have prepared readers to appreciate the Anglo-Saxon sounds of modern poets like Seamus Heaney or Ted Hughes.¹⁵

15. Unfortunately, the publication of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* came too late for us to examine his version of lines 702b-736a for our paper.

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On the other hand, the translations which aim at recreation can develop new and unexpected interpretations. With their interest in telling a good story above all, such translations have introduced modern readers to the imaginative world of the *Beowulf* poet. Indeed the *Beowulf* story continues to inspire new creations such as Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead*.¹⁶

16. Michael Crichton, *Eaters of the Dead*, London: Arrow, 1997.

APPENDIX:

Source Text and Translations of Beowulf lines 702b-736a

Source Text¹⁷

- 702 **Com on wanre niht**
 703 **scriðan sceadugenga.** Sceotend swæfon,
 704 þa þæt hornreced healdan scoldon,
 705 ealle buton anum. Þæt wæs yldum cup
 706 *þæt hie ne moste,* þa metod nolde,
 707 se scynscaþa under sceadu bregdan;
 708 ac he wæccende wrapum on andan
 709 bad bolgenmod beadwa geþinges.
- 710 **Da com of more under misthleopum**
 711 **Grendel gongan,** godes yrre bæst;
 712 mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
 713 sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.
 714 Wod under wolcnum to þæs þe he winreced,
 715 goldsele gumena, gearwost wisse,
 716 fættum fahne. Ne wæs þæt forma sið
 717 þæt he Hroþgares ham gesohte;
 718 næfre he on aldordagum ær ne siþðan
 719 heardran hæle, healðegnas fand.
- 720 **Com þa to recede rinc siðian,**
 721 **dreamum bedæled.** Duru sona onarn,
 722 fyrbendum fæst, syþðan he hire folmum [æthr]an;
 723 onbræd þa bealohydig, ða he [ge]bolgen wæs,
 724 recedes muþan. Raþe æfter þon
 725 on fagne flor feond treddode,
 726 eode yrremod; him of eagum stod
 727 ligge gelicost leoht unfæger.
 728 Geseah he in recede rinca manige,
 729 swefan sibbegedriht samod ætgædere,
 730 magorinca heap. Þa his mod ahlog;

17. Frederick Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburgh*, Third edition with Supplements, Boston: Heath, 1953.

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731 mynte þæt he gedælde, ærþon dæg cwome,
 732 atol aglæca, anra gehwylces
 733 lif wið lice, þa him alumpen wæs
 734 wistfille wen. Ne wæs þæt wyrd þa gen
 735 þæt he ma moste manna cynnes
 736 ðicgean ofer þa niht.

Donaldson

There came gliding *in the black night* the walker in darkness. The warriors slept who should hold the horned house — all but one. It was known to men that when the Ruler did not wish it the hostile creature *might not* drag them away beneath the shadows. But he, lying awake for the fierce foe, with heart swollen in anger awaited the outcome of the fight.

(XI) Then from the moor under the mist-hills Grendel came walking, wearing God's anger. The foul ravager thought to catch some one of mankind there in the high hall. Under the clouds he moved until he could see most clearly the wine-hall, treasure-house of men, shining with gold. That was not the first time that he had sought Hrothgar's home. Never before or since in his life-days did he find harder luck, hardier hall-thanes.

The creature deprived of joy came walking to the hall. Quickly the door gave way, fastened with fire-forged bands, when he touched it with his hands. Driven by evil desire, swollen with rage, he tore it open, the hall's mouth. After that the foe at once stepped onto the shining floor, advanced angrily. From his eyes came a light not fair, most like a flame. He saw many men in the hall, a band of kinsmen all asleep together, a company of war-men. Then his heart laughed: dreadful monster, he thought that before the day came he would divide the life from the body of every one of them, for there had come to him a hope of full-feasting. It was not his fate that *when that night was over he should* feast on more of mankind.

Gummere

702 — *Thro' wan night* striding,
 703 **came the walker-in-shadow.** Warriors slept
 704 whose hest was to guard the gabled hall, —
 705 all save one. 'Twas widely known
 706 that against God's will the ghostly ravager
 707 *him could not* hurl to haunts of darkness;
 708 wakeful, ready, with warrior's wrath,
 709 bold he bided the battle's issue.
 710 **THEN from the moorland, by misty crags,**
 711 **with God's wrath laden, Grendel came.**
 712 The monster was minded of mankind now
 713 sundry to seize in the stately house.
 714 Under welkin he walked, till the wine-palace there,
 715 gold-hall of men, he gladly discerned,
 716 flashing with fretwork. Not first time, this,
 717 that he the home of Hrothgar sought, —
 718 yet ne'er in his life-day, late or early,
 719 such hardy heroes, such hall-thanes, found!
 720 **To the house the warrior walked apace,**
 721 **parted from peace;** the portal opened,
 722 though with forged bolts fast, when his fists had struck it,
 723 and baleful he burst in his blatant rage,
 724 the house's mouth. All hastily, then,
 725 o'er fair-paved floor the fiend trod on,
 726 ireful he strode; there streamed from his eyes
 727 fearful flashes, like flame to see.
 728 He spied in hall the hero-band,
 729 kin and clansmen clustered asleep,
 730 hardy liegemen. Then laughed his heart;
 731 for the monster was minded, ere morn should dawn,
 732 savage, to sever the soul of each,
 733 life from body, since lusty banquet
 734 waited his will! But Wyrð *forbade him*
 735 to seize any more of men on earth
 736 *after that evening.*

*Translations of Beowulf***Greenfield**

702 *Out of dark night*
 703 **swept death's shadow forward.** The warders slept,
 704 warriors set to guard that gabled hall —
 705 all but one: for men were well aware
 706 that against God's will the evil-doer
 707 *could not* drag them down into the shadows;
 708 but he in anger watched and waited
 709 for his foe, and for the fight's outcome.
 710 **Out of the moor then, under mist-hills,**
 711 **Grendel glided,** carrying God's wrath;
 712 the evil monster meant to ensnare
 713 some one of mankind in the high hall.
 714 Under clouds he advanced, till clearly
 715 visible the wine-hall rose before him,
 716 shining with gold. Most surely had he
 717 in the past so honored Hrothgar's home;
 718 but he had not found in former days
 719 harder luck or hardier hall-thanes!
 720 **Up to the door then the demon strode,**
 721 **joyless, hopeless.** It sprang straight open
 722 at his touch for all its fire-forged bands:
 723 enraged, eager to destroy, he wrenched
 724 the hall's mouth wide. Unhesitating,
 725 afire with wrath, the foe stepped upon
 726 the shining floor; a wicked gleam shone
 727 from his eyes, a fearful flamelike light.
 728 Inside the hall he saw many men,
 729 a staunch company of young kinsmen,
 730 all asleep; and then his spirit laughed:
 731 the dread and fearsome foe, having now
 732 such bounty, meant to draw from body,
 733 before the light of day, each one's life
 734 — and feast! Fate was not so generous:
 735 *no more would he* feed on human flesh
 736 *beyond that night.*

Wright

In black night the prowler of the dark came stalking. The soldiers who were supposed to defend the gabled hall were asleep — all except one. It was generally believed that the fiend *could not* drag people into the lower shades against the will of God. Yet Beowulf, keeping an angry watch against the enemy, waited for the outcome of the battle with growing fury.

Now Grendel, with the wrath of God on his back, came out of the moors and the mist-ridden fells with the intention of trapping some man in Heorot. Under the clouds he strode, until he came in sight of the rich banqueting hall glistening with plated gold. It was not the first time that he had paid a visit to Hrothgar's hall; but never before or afterwards did he experience such bad luck with its defenders.

When the unhappy creature approached Heorot, the door, which was secured with wrought iron bars, burst open at the touch of his talons. In his malicious fury he tore down the entrance of the building. Then the raging fiend, with horrible firelit eyes, stepped quickly upon the tessellated floor. Inside the hall he saw a great band of brothers-in-arms sleeping together, at which he laughed to himself, for the cruel demon, who meant to kill every single one of them before daybreak, saw before him the prospect of a huge feast. But *after that night* it was not his luck to devour *any more* people.