

The History and Impact of Translation in *Beowulf*

By: Greta Marie Gehring

ID: 1804480

2020

University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Medieval Studies

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name.....Greta Gehring.....

Date ...29/09/2020.....

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of ...MA Medieval Studies.....

Name ..Greta Gehring.....

Date 29/09/2020.....

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name...Greta

Gehring.....

Date: 29/09/2020.....

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name...Greta Gehring

Date...29/09/2020

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed:

Date:

Table of Contents

Abstract -- 5

Introduction -- 8

The Beowulf Poet, the Scribes and the ‘First Translation’ -- 16

The Modern Translations -- 32

Key Passages -- 42

Conclusion -- 53

Bibliography -- 55

Abstract: This paper goes into depth on the history of translation and bias in the transcription of the epic poem *Beowulf*, detailing its history, impact on modern culture and interpretations of modern retellings of the tale by discussing the first existent copy, four modern translations, their word choices, possible author bias, and passages that can completely alter the meaning and themes displayed by the original existing manuscript.

Dedicated to all my friends who were willing to listen to me explain my dissertation themes over dinner and Meg who did the same thing but over email, and also looked at all my papers for this course with a red pen and copious amounts of question marks

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Harriet Webster for her wonderful advice and tips for formatting my paper

&

Thank you to Meghan Rinn and Natalie Hadjiloukas for their readings of this paper for the sake of clarity

1. Introduction

The task of translation is a near-impossible process. There are no ‘correct’ translations, only ‘wrong’ ones. Even if a linguistic genius were to translate a work, any work, there would still be those who would find issue with the manuscript in some way, shape or form. Doubly so if the original text is in an ancient language, where the access to the original is restricted and very few people may be able to read the original. Coupled with word choices, author bias, and lack of cultural and historical understanding of the world the piece is set in, even excellent translations can be rendered unintelligible to the casual reader. While there will always be scholars and academics reading a new translation, there be those who will be experiencing the story for the first time and as such, the translation must also be done with them in mind. For new readers, it may be the first, last and only time they will interact with the text and therefore it is the duty of the translators to represent the text as accurately and factually as possible. Some translators will choose to bridge this gap by adding more exposition to the text itself, while others will use footnotes or a glossary. All these methods can be as effective as they can be irritating: it depends on the presentation of each individual piece. These methods can give an element of inaccessibility to the casual reader, especially in the case of ancient texts like *Beowulf*, where the general knowledge of the story despite being one of the most important texts in the English language, is relatively unknown outside of the battle with Grendel. The world depicted to modern viewers has very little connection with the world they know, which is a definite factor in this lack of general knowledge compared to say, the works of Shakespeare.

I became aware of this issue for the first time many years ago in a university class that had nothing at all to do with *Beowulf*, folklore or even Europe. I took a class on *The*

Tale of Genji, taught by one of the world's premiere scholars on the subject using the critically acclaimed translation by Royall Tyler.¹ Even in Japan, the plot and characters of *The Tale of Genji* are not particularly well known. While Japanese students read excerpts of the story in school, it is written in Classical Japanese of one thousand years ago and therefore sounds just as unintelligible as works from around the same time in Europe do to modern audiences. It does not help that *The Tale of Genji* takes place entirely in the royal court in Heian-kyo (modern day Kyoto) and is about the relationships the hero has with the many people in the court around him, with very little action.² *The Tale of Genji* is actually about the struggles of a disinherited prince, his attempts to find love and acceptance in the world, the conflict he feels between his natural desires and his desire to become a monk, and the political fight between his Minamoto faction and the other Fujiwara faction court, whose leader is the powerful Lady Kokiden, a woman who is partially responsible for the death of Genji's mother. However, if one were to read the Royall Tyler translation they would have an extremely difficult time discerning the plot and themes of this story due to the flowery prose that Tyler deliberately chose to emulate the flowing and poetic speech of the Murasaki Shikibu-penned original. While it would have been perfectly normal to the high court readers of the Heian era, it is nearly impenetrable to modern Japanese speakers and just as difficult to understand with this kind of translation.³ While the book had summaries of each chapter and footnotes, it was still not nearly enough to fully grasp the entire story in context. The class read the entire book over the course of the semester and each week, we relied on our professor to explain the complex workings of a world that was not ours nor did we have any context

¹ Royall Tyler, *The Tale Of Genji*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York: Viking, 2001).

² Besides the political manoeuvrings, the only real 'action' scene occurs when an evil spirit possesses one of Genji's lovers, killing her and kickstarting most of Genji's inner motivations in the future.

³ All Japanese students read excerpts of *The Tale of Genji* in high school. It is much like the works of Shakespeare in western canon both in terms of importance and low understandability thanks to the evolution of language and culture.

for to make sense of the story, much like the subject of this paper, though it is a little closer to our current culture than *Genji*.⁴

While no one would deny that the Tyler translation of *The Tale of Genji* is a masterpiece, it prompted me to closely examine the translated content I consumed, regardless of if it was for education or leisure. As someone who has lived in a foreign country for many years, there are incorrect and downright wrong translations everywhere, even when there is no shortage of bilingual speakers now. Our knowledge of other cultures is severely limited by translations as well and relies heavily on what just so happens to get translated into our native tongue.

Of course, there is a limit to how quickly a translator can work. It is for this reason that a factual translation—that is a translation and not a retelling—is so important. In the case of *Beowulf*, a reader has quite a selection of choices of translations and mediums from which they can choose to experience the story. In some cases, these choices are drastically different in tone and context, and will result in a different interpretation of the themes and characters. *Beowulf*'s source material has spawned movies, alternative fiction, and even animated cartoons. Needless to say, some of these are drastically different from the source and the more scholarly translations. To give an idea of the wide range of *Beowulf* works, two of the most recent books marketed as translations are a serious scholarly translation by JRR Tolkien of *The Lord of the Rings* fame and a new 'translation' that came out in August 2020. The newest translation, by Maria Dahvana, is advertised as a new translation of the source material and makes much

⁴ All in all, it was a very enjoyable class, but if I had simply happened to pick up the Tyler translation at the bookstore and attempted to read it on my own, could I honestly say that I enjoyed the book much less have been able to finish it? I cannot say for sure, but it is thanks to that professor that even now I have a great affection for the Shining Prince and his Heian cohorts.

fanfare of how ‘modern’ it is compared to the others. The advertising seems to be hinging entirely on her changing the dragon’s gender to female at the end of the story also attempts to tell the story through a modern language choice mentioning the first word of the translation is ‘bro’.⁵ While there is merit in this kind of overly-modern edition that would appeal to new younger audiences, one wonders whether or not it will be able to capture the somber, tragic tone of the story. At the time of this paper’s writing, one cannot possibly know.⁶ The difference in context of the hero slaying what is an embodiment of fate or a natural disaster changes to the hero slaying another woman, while the original has Beowulf fight a male opponent, a female opponent and then the gender neutral dragon, which is better classified as a natural disaster than a sentient being. The readers of this new retelling will have a significantly different impression of the meaning and symbolism of *Beowulf* that may be their only impression of it. To call something like this a ‘translation’ is disingenuous. It would be one thing if it was labeled as a retelling, but as long as it is labeled as a translation there will be students who will pick it up, thinking they are getting an ‘accurate’ translation and far removed from the intentions of the Beowulf Poet. Changing the intention from a cycle of man, woman and then natural disaster greatly undermines the intent of the poem, which is not only to show the inescapability of destiny but also the brutality of nature.

While it may not make much of a difference of impact and meaning between the Heaney and Swanton translations of *Beowulf*, there are considerably different implications in the text if one reads Kirtlan’s translation—one of the easiest accessed as it

⁵ Maria Dahvana Headley, ‘This is a Beowulf Translation draft finishing face. She got a little unavoidably delayed - but she’s out next year from @mcdbooks/@fsgbooks and my friends, the first word of my translation is “Bro.” Also the dragon is a she. Others have gendered her. Why not me? Get ready.’ [https://twitter.com/MARIADAHVANA/status/1114344048465080320?s=20] (@MARIADAHVANA, 06/04/2019).

⁶ Said translation was released shortly before this paper’s due date, unfortunately.

is available on *Project Gutenberg* for free—Tolkien’s translation—a recently published book despite the text being nearly a century old, or the new Maria Dahvana translation. An examination of the different translations of *Beowulf* is particularly enlightening given the trend of trying and wanting to ‘fix’ *Beowulf*. Perhaps simply its nature of being the earliest written work of fiction in English allows it to inspire authors, even though they may not have much knowledge of the world or setting *Beowulf* takes place in. This has led to many varied and interesting interpretations throughout the years. JRR Tolkien even attempts to reconstruct an earlier version of the tale through his own translation of the story, weaving a version of the tale where Beowulf does fight Grendel but with some named companions, all of whom fail and are killed before Beowulf himself steps up to the plate.⁷ One of the most famous retellings to this day, published as a stand-alone novel is John Gardner’s *Grendel*, told from the point of view of the poem’s first antagonist. Gardner paints Grendel in a sympathetic light, heavily borrowing from the original and extrapolating from Grendel’s description in the original.⁸ Fittingly, it is not advertised as a translation of *Beowulf* and can be a companion piece or side story as it ends with Grendel’s death in the same manner of the poem. Beowulf himself barely appears in the story itself.

While the concept of rewriting old tales to suit the needs of a modern audience or focus on a different character are not new, it is difficult to say whether there would be so many versions of *Beowulf* if there was a translation that was readily available with enough cultural and historical context. However, just because a modern adaption may or

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary With Sellic Spell* (Harper Collins: Great Britain, 2014), p. 355-359, 404-407.

⁸ John Gardner, *Grendel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

may not work, does not necessarily mean one based too heavily on the original will work either.

Out of the many recent retellings of *Beowulf*, several of the pieces revolve around Neil Gaiman, of *American Gods* fame, either as stories he has written or media that he was involved with. The famed author has written several short stories using *Beowulf* as a theme and basis for the narrative. While *The Monarch of the Glen*, an *American Gods* novella, is about the break from tradition, two others *Bay Wolf* from *Smoke and Mirrors*, and the 2007 motion-capture film *Beowulf* explore the relationship between the title character and Grendel's mother.⁹ While Gaiman seems to have grasped the concept that Grendel and his mother embody the taboos of Anglo-Saxon culture, he also seems to believe that Beowulf himself should also fall into those taboos. *Bay Wolf* functions with Beowulf as the narrator and he is ambiguous about his sexual relationship with Grendel's mother, but to imply it happened at all indicates that Gaiman missed that Beowulf's overwhelming goodness would protect him from such temptations, assuming he had them at all.

The motion-capture film does a comparatively better job of telling the story, especially at the beginning of the movie and with its monstrous depiction of Grendel, Grendel speaking entirely in Old English which firmly cements him in with the traditions of old, and his defeat which is identical to his defeat in the poem. However, this starts to unravel once Beowulf comes to defeat Grendel's mother (portrayed by an extremely beautiful and golden Angelina Jolie) and instead of killing her opts to have sex with her.

⁹ Neil Gaiman, *Fragile Things* (New York: William Morrow, 2006), Neil Gaiman, *Smoke And Mirrors: Short Fictions And Illusions* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2001), & Robert Zemeckis (dir.), *Beowulf* [Film], (USA & UK: ImageMover and Shangri-La Entertainment, 2007). Both *Fragile Things* and *Smoke And Mirrors* are collections of short stories and are not entirely about *Beowulf*.

The fruit of their intercourse later comes back to bite Beowulf in the form of the dragon at the end of the story, resulting in the father and son killing each other. This is excellent thematically given the themes of Anglo-Saxon fears and would have proven to be a good twist as a stand-alone movie, especially with the fact that movies generally do not have narration like the bards in Heorot to foreshadow the approach of the dragon later in the poem. Unfortunately, this twist does not make any sense in terms of an adaption of the epic poem *Beowulf* and muddies the clear themes that the Beowulf Poet was trying to create. It is easy to see how a few lines in a translation could turn *Beowulf* from a story about a Christ-figure tormented by fate to a story about a fallen hero tormented by himself and his mistakes. That is not to say one is more interesting than the other, but it is important to have good translations for these reasons. With a good, clear translation with an appropriate amount of historical and cultural context, it is possible these modern retellings would be completely different if they existed at all. The impression of the audience watching the motion-capture film will be wildly different than the impressions of a reader reading a translation at home. While *Beowulf* certainly does have plenty of fighting and gore, it is not nearly as sordid or morally bankrupt as the movie portrays. In the event that a member of the audience were to read *Beowulf* after watching the movie, they would surely be surprised at the differences if not outright disappointed.

One of the keys of the mystery as to why there are so many odd interpretations of *Beowulf* lies in the variety of the translations available to the modern English-speaking audience. Given *Beowulf*'s importance in the English canon the number of translations is not a surprise, nor should it be and in fact, should be encouraged. While the translations do not differ widely from the basic plot, there are key differences at crucial parts in the narratives. To emphasize these, this paper will be focusing on the existing 'original' manuscript and four separate translations; the Beowulf Poet, Ernest J.B. Kirtlan, J.R.R.

Tolkien, Michael Swanton and Seamus Heaney's. Each edition will be analyzed by who the author was, who their intended audience is, word choices, accessibility and in some cases key passages of grievous errors.

2. The Beowulf Poet, the Scribes and the 'First Translation'

Beowulf exists today as the work of several people over the centuries and understanding who those people were is the first step in producing a translation that conveys all of the essential nuances of the poem. The first translation of *Beowulf* occurred when it was committed to text for the first time by an individual known as the Beowulf Poet. There is hardly any information about them that can be gleaned from the text as they did not sign their work, making it one of the many challenges in translating *Beowulf* for contemporary audiences. There are many mysteries surrounding the original text and who wrote it, to the extent the only existing version today is itself a copy of another manuscript along with a collection of other works from an unknown time period by an unknown author. There were at least three separate people involved in the creation of *Beowulf*, two of them likely being monks who can be credited with *Beowulf*'s survival to modern times. The existing manuscript today is known as the Nowell Codex, sometimes simply known as the Beowulf Manuscript due to its most famous inhabitant, and both *Beowulf* and the other texts present in the bound volume's original authors and scribes' identities are unknown. There are several theories, but the consensus is the scribes were members of the clergy with the author possibly being a layman.¹⁰

There has been extensive academic work to try and put a rough date on when the poem began to circulate, which helps to make the Beowulf Poet less of a mystery. JRR Tolkien suggests that the poem itself retains too genuine a memory of Anglo-Saxon paganism to have been composed more than a few generations after the completion of the Christianization of England around the seventh or eighth centuries.¹¹ This has been

¹⁰ Zacharius P. Thundy, 'Beowulf: Date and Authorship', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* Vol. 87, No. 1 (1986), 102-116 (p.104) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43343721>> [Accessed 13 July 2020].

¹¹ JRR Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters And The Critics*, 1997 ed. (London: Oxford University Press), p. 26-27.

supported by several other prominent scholars including Leonard Neidorf who published a study that indicates through word choice and flow that the poem was written by a single person.¹²

From the historical information that can be gleaned from the narration, Beowulf's uncle, King Hygelac, has allowed historians to place the dating of the *Beowulf* timeline to sometime in the early 500s. Hygelac, under the name King Chlochilaicus, appears in *The History of the Franks* by Gregory of Tours which was completed in 594. Gregory of Tours identifies Hygelac as the king of the Danes and details that he perished during a raid in Frisia. According to N. F. S. Grundtvig, this would place his death in the year 516.¹³ He is also mentioned in the *Liber Monstrorum*, where he appears alongside creatures such as centaurs and other mythical monsters, as well as real-life peoples like the Ethiopians.¹⁴ Both sources mention Hygelac's massive size. Thanks to the early composition date, we know that the manuscript of *The History of the Franks* was completed relatively soon after Hygelac's death making it an almost contemporary source despite its errors concerning Hygelac's origins.¹⁵ One can assume that Gregory of Tours did not care much about where exactly enemy invaders came from and chose Danes as a vague indication of where Hygelac was from. As a result, *Beowulf* could not have been written down before the year 500 and it seems unlikely it could be written down soon after. The final result is that even the original text source for *Beowulf* is at *least*¹⁶ nearly fifty years disconnected from the

¹² Nicola Davis, (8 April 2019). "Beowulf the work of single author, research suggests". <theguardian.com> [Retrieved 20 May 2019].

¹³ A. Soby Christensen, "Beowulf, Hygelac Og Chlochilaichus. Om Beretningskronologien I Beowulf". *Historisk Tidsskrift*, Issue 105, nr. 1, February 2013, <<https://tidsskrift.dk/historisktidsskrift/article/view/56158>> [Accessed 26 August 2020].

¹⁴ Andy Orchard, (18 January 2005). "Liber monstrorum". <web.archive.org> [Accessed 30 June 2020].

¹⁵ The Latin Library *Gregory of Tours, Decem Libri Historiarum III 3* <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/gregorytours.html>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁶ But likely several hundred years.

original events that inspired it, allowing for the gap between the original oral tales to differ wildly in content until the point where the Beowulf Poet finally wrote it down.

From this point, it is unclear exactly when *Beowulf* as we know it came into being. If it started its life as an oral tale and Tolkien is correct in his dating of the story, that would mean a nearly 200-year gap between the historical event of Hygelac's death and the first written version of the poem.¹⁷ During that gap, what kind of story or stories about Beowulf were in circulation, the number of stories being transmitted at this time and how they transformed in that two-hundred-year gap is impossible to determine. The result is the version the Beowulf Poet committed to parchment the end game of an at least two century long period of the story being told amongst the masses written down, retold, regurgitated, reimagined and written down again. The existence of additional stories outside the codified narrative when it comes to epics is not unusual in any case, especially when the work began as an oral tradition.¹⁸ As such, we cannot be sure what the exact status of the poem was before it finally reached the Beowulf Poet. Due to some of the linguistic features such as verb endings the original version was likely written down sometime in the late 700s to 800s and the Nowell Codex was likely around the year 1000.¹⁹ There are some indications of an existing mythos around Beowulf, including the Bear Son's Tale, which are expertly discussed in JRR Tolkien's 'reconstruction' of an original version of *Beowulf*, *Sellic Spell*.²⁰ Beowulf shares many characteristics with the folklore figure the Bear Son,

¹⁷ The 'original' poem has since been lost. Center for Hellenistic Studies, Harvard University, *Beowulf and Oral Epic Tradition* <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6275.4-beowulf-and-oral-epic-tradition#n.*> [accessed 5 May 2020]. & Sorrell, Paul. (1992) *Oral Tradition: Oral History And The World Of Beowulf* <https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/7i/5_sorrell.pdf> pp. 31-34 [accessed 13 June 2020].

¹⁸ The case of The Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* differs wildly from its text version to versions maintained by bards (William John Gruffydd) and The Epic of Gilgamesh is known to vary on some minor details, from how many days Enkidu stayed with Shamhat to Humbaba's origins (ranging from a monstrous giant to a benevolent one, as well as not being a giant at all but a human).

¹⁹ Stephen Mitchell, *Beowulf*. (Yale University Press, 2017), pp. xi-xii.

²⁰ JRR Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary With Sellic Spell* (2014) pp. 355-359, 404-407.

sharing his great strength, a magical sword, and a similar name.²¹ While the narrative is consistent for the most part in the noble and brave (but never a braggart) characterization of Beowulf, there is a rare continuity error later in the text that indicates that prior to becoming a hero Beowulf was disliked and considered lazy by his people.²² This indicates that Beowulf at one point was not as perfect as the overall narrative in the existing manuscript would have led us to believe.²³ Continuing with the concept of the Bear Son, Tolkien believes there are indications that Beowulf may have had a group of named companions originally such as Hondscioh, who exists only to be tragically eaten, and possibly even Breca the Bronding who is mentioned in the narrative earlier as Beowulf's friend and swimming contestant but does not make a proper appearance in the story outside of Beowulf's narration. Tolkien believes that Beowulf's companions were removed from the narrative at some point before being written down as the version of Beowulf with his effectively nameless companions that we know today.²⁴

This leads to the question of what *can* be determined when it comes to the Beowulf Poet? The linguistic evaluation discussed above makes it clear that the Poet was writing around the year 700.²⁵ This was sometime after the Christianization of England, and with a change in religion, there were likely changes to the oral tales told of Beowulf. The use of the feminine personal pronoun 'heo/hio' in certain areas of the text, such as line 1293 (heo) and line 1941 (hio) suggest that the original may have been written at least two centuries earlier than the surviving copy.²⁶ In the end, there is not much that can be gleaned from the

²¹ "Bee Wolf".

²² Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf A New Verse Translation*. (W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), p. 149.

²³ Or that Scribe One would want us to believe.

²⁴ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary With Sellic Spell*, p. 233.

²⁵ Mitchell, *Beowulf*, p. xii.

²⁶ Michael Swanton, *Beowulf*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 3.

text about the Poet themselves, not even whether or not if *Beowulf* was an original creation of the Poet's or not!²⁷

This brings the history of the poem to the Nowell Codex. *Beowulf* is part of the Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, a collection of two manuscripts. The second is known as the Nowell Codex, or sometimes just the Beowulf Manuscript.²⁸ *Beowulf* is contained in the second of the two, named for one of its former owners, Laurence Nowell. The Codex is written in two separate hands and each of the varied works -- a life of Saint Christopher, *Wonders of the East*, a translation of *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Beowulf* and *Judith* - share the theme of monsters.²⁹ It was owned by scholar Laurence Nowell in the 1500s and was later purchased by Sir Robert Cotton, where the full manuscript gets its name. It is there that problems concerning translating *Beowulf* begin. In 1731 the volume was damaged in a fire, resulting in several damaged pages of the poem. The damaged pages and complete poem were transcribed in the years 1786-1787 by Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin and another professional copyist before the pages could deteriorate further.³⁰ It is thanks to these transcriptions that later translations can be made at all, but potentially opens any later editions made from them to as much error as working from the original!

The Nowell Codex contains the earliest extant copy of *Beowulf*, and extensive study has shed light on the scribes who wrote the text.³¹ As mentioned before, the earliest version

²⁷ It seems unlikely, but it is certainly possible. The Tolkiens are most definitely of the belief that *Beowulf* has folkloric origins.

²⁸ London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV.

²⁹ Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*. University of Toronto Press, 1995. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287xc6>. [accessed 26 Aug. 2020]. To further this theory, the images included in the text range from double-headed centaurs to a tree that grows jewels.

³⁰ K. Kiernan, (2011) *Electronic Beowulf Archived the Wayback Machine* Third Edition, "Thorkelin Transcripts." <<https://web.archive.org/web/20110629051334/http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/transcriptscollations/overview#thk>> [Accessed 5 May 2020].

³¹ Swanton, *Beowulf*, pp. 2-4. & Davis, *Beowulf The Work Of Single Author, Research Suggests*

of *Beowulf* exists thanks to a pair of scribes who lived in the 1000s. As most scribes were copyists most of the time, those working on the Nowell Codex had a version of *Beowulf* they were working from which allowed for the text to be very consistent despite the change in hands during the transcription process. Based on paleography, there were two different individuals who copied the text of *Beowulf*, who for this paper will be referred to as Scribe One and Scribe Two respectively. As literacy was highly limited at the time of transcription, approximately the year 1000 BCE, it is probable that the text came from a monastery and both scribes were monks.³² Scribe One was far more careful in his copying, as his portion of the text includes updated spellings, contemporary words, signs of proofreading, and active editing so that there are fewer references to paganism and more references to the Christian God.³³ Scribe Two enters the picture mid-sentence at line 1939 and continues the rest of the work. Swanton suggests that Scribe One fell ill or was assigned another task or perhaps died.³⁴ Regardless of Scribe One's fate, Scribe Two completed the work in 'an older school of insular writing than its companion hand' who, rather than the original scribe who started *Beowulf*, then went on to complete *Judith*, finishing the Nowell Codex.³⁵ Scribe Two seems to have considerably less interest in writing the story, writing quickly and using more abbreviations allowing for historians to assign a more concrete time period to when *Beowulf* took place. While Scribe One was careful to update the spellings of the words in front of him, Scribe Two simply copied what was in front of him.³⁶ Swanton writes 'that these features [of Scribe Two's work] are the result of faithful copying, rather than linguistic peculiarities of the scribe himself, is

³² William Marx, *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature* (School of Cultural Studies Department of English, University of Wales Trinity St. David Lampeter), unit 2 p. 1. King Alfred contributed greatly to literacy and Christianity in under his rule and many of the works that exist today are thanks to his efforts.

³³ Swanton, *Beowulf*, p.3

³⁴ Swanton, *Beowulf*, p. 2.

³⁵ Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, *Beowulf And Judith* (New York: Columbia University, 1953), p. xvii.

³⁶ Michael Swanton, *Beowulf*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) p. 2.

indicated that the text for *Judith*, for which he was also responsible, is written in a perfectly regular form of literary late West Saxon'.³⁷ The differences in approach to the manuscript suggests that Scribe One was likely a devout Christian, actively engaging in censorship of the piece in front of them. It would not have been unheard of for Christians to adopt local heroes,³⁸ gods³⁹ and holidays⁴⁰ as part of the religious conversion process. To do the same with *Beowulf* would not have been odd in the slightest, of course, assuming Scribe One was not simply a huge fan of *Beowulf*. Meanwhile, their replacement in Scribe Two was a far more competent transcriber with a simple goal and simply copied what was in front of them regardless of the depth of their faith. They do not show any major interest in *Beowulf* and as a result, Scribe Two saved much more of the original text by doing their job, allowing historians to get a clearer picture of when the events of *Beowulf* take place, and thus place it within its proper historical context.

A careful examination of Scribe One's work further illuminates the absolute necessity for a translated edition of *Beowulf*⁴¹ to show and demonstrate knowledge of not only the authorship of the Nowell Codex, but the history of the *Beowulf* Poet and the text as it likely existed in the oral tradition. Failure to account for the extent of Scribe One's changes, especially when Scribe One's edits create a more confusing text, renders a poor translation. One such example of Scribe One not fully understanding the text itself is the case of Hondscioh, whose name literally translates as "Glove". The scribe writes that Grendel had 'devoured the victim utterly, even his hands and feet'.⁴² Christopher Tolkien's

³⁷ Swanton, *Beowulf*, p. 2.

³⁸ For example, King Arthur (who was already taken from his Welsh origins to begin with) appearing in many of the *Saint's Lives* no matter how impossible or chronologically challenged.

³⁹ Such as the goddess Brigid becoming associated with Saint Brigid and many more.

⁴⁰ Pretty much any holiday in the Christian calendar was originally a pagan one. For example: Halloween originally being the pagan festival Samhain.

⁴¹ And any translated text, really.

⁴² Mitchell, *Beowulf*, p. 49.

notes in the commentary state that he suspects that the scribe did not believe that someone named “Glove” could be a correct name and therefore changed it to being ‘even his hands and feet’.⁴³ Scribe One is correct in thinking “Glove” is a strange name for a man, but it is not outside of the realm of possibility, especially if this part was embellished and made more fantastical somewhere along the line in oral transmission. Changing the passage to "even his hands and feet" may have made more sense to the scribe given the presence of Grendel, but it potentially obscures other information and intended meaning.

Continuing in a similar vein, lines 1666-7 contain the word ‘*hae num*’ with an erased ‘ð’ but with nothing to replace it. Scribe One likely had no idea what it was supposed to be and Christopher Tolkien notes that he believes it is the name of the group of people Queen Hygd comes from, the Haereðe.⁴⁴ Scribe One appeared to have mistaken it for the similar word ‘*haeledum*’ and realized that it was not quite right but does not have enough information or knowledge about Scandinavian people to recognize what it was supposed to be. This indicates that the original text version was already several generations separated from the version the Beowulf scribes had, assuming they had even known the story prior to writing it down in the first place. As they were living in what is now the modern United Kingdom, it is likely they had never even been to the continent and would not only lack intimate knowledge of the people who lived there, but also the geographical peculiarities of the various tribes and small nations in the area. Of course, that is assuming they were living at the same time as the Beowulf Poet, and they most certainly were not, causing another level of displacement from the source material.

⁴³ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, pp. 343-344 & pp. 318-323.

⁴⁴ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, pp. 318-320.

There is clearly a cultural and historical disconnect between the ‘original’ text and the scribes. They lived in a different world than the world depicted in *Beowulf* and the best examples of these are the attempts Scribe One makes to censor and remove overtly pagan references. They would feel no need to do such a thing if the scribes still lived in a pagan world. By this point the pagan past was distant enough that the *Beowulf* scribes could not remove all Norse references even if they had wanted to. They lacked knowledge to recognize them all and as such some remain, cementing *Beowulf* as undoubtedly originally a pagan piece. Not only are there many references to Scandinavian kings and historical events, the *Beowulf* Poet uses historical references to frame the story’s theme of tragedy. They also use many old Norse tales such as the story of Sigemund which also serves to foreshadow the climax of the poem. As an interesting twist, Sigemund in *Beowulf* is described as the person who slays a fearsome dragon and secures its horde of treasure for himself and not his son Sigurd⁴⁵ who is more famous for the deed. This displacement may be intentional, or it may simply be an earlier form of a myth that was later formed to be become Sigurd’s. Either way, the manuscript uses Sigemund as a tool to foreshadow the eventual tragedy that will befall *Beowulf* at the end of the poem.

In the case of the Finn Episode, *Beowulf* is one of the only records of the event, yet the way it is used indicates that the audience would have had enough historical context to understand the overall situation of the tragedy of the central character, Hildeburh. The Finn Episode is a very good example of this both in that it is an account found nowhere else and that, unlike the case of the modified Sigemund tale, the account is unknown outside of a single fragment known as *The Fight at Finnsburh* making *Beowulf* a valuable historical record in what would normally be a fantasy story.⁴⁶ What remains of the fragment differs

⁴⁵ Also known as Siegfried.

⁴⁶ Marx, William *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature*, unit 8, p. 2-3

from *Beowulf* in several ways, but like the use of Sigemund, the Beowulf Poet likely took a story that the audience would have recognized and altered or emphasized other elements to the story to further their point. By focusing on a character who was likely a minor character in the overall story, the Beowulf Poet is able to develop both Hildeburh *and* Queen Wealhtheow.

The fragment focuses more on the battle that ensued, detailing the final struggle of Hnæf and his men, mentioning that the battle continued for five days with no mention of the cause of the conflict or even which faction is which, resulting in a very enigmatic and frustratingly exciting piece. The version in *Beowulf* expands the story hinted at in the fragment, giving more context to the identities in the fragment and introduces a new, unmentioned in the fragment character: Queen Hildeburh. In fact, the version of the story in *Beowulf* focuses almost entirely on the Queen Hildeburh and her failed role of a peace weaver. This allows for parallels with Queen Wealhtheow in the *Beowulf* canon. In both cases, there is little direct mention of the conflict itself that causes them to lose their families. The murder of Wealhtheow's sons at the hands of their uncle is there solely as dramatic irony for people who already know the about what must have been a famous historical event and is not even mentioned explicitly in the story.

Given that Hildeburh does not exist in the *The Fight at Finnsburh* that remains with us we have no idea if Hildeburh existed or not in reality but the theme of failed alliances and the loss of family members are poignant and intended to draw a connection to the tragic fates of Hildeburh's family. The Beowulf Poet even has Beowulf himself remark that the marriage between Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, and Ingeld of the Heaðobards is doomed to fail and a very real sense of genre savvy!⁴⁷ One can assume that regardless of the

⁴⁷ London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV lines 2067-2069.

historicity of Hildeburh, the Poet intended to draw explicit connections between the two, allowing modern readers to figure out what will happen in the future themselves even if they have no knowledge of history. It is obvious that the Beowulf Poet had a clear goal in mind: to frame the narrative with other events of their pagan history to further their thematic purposes. It stands to reason that if these events were unknown by the time the Scribes were making their own copy, Scribe One may have attempted to substitute the historical figures for more famous Christian ones that would have been better known by their new audience. The Scribes have at least some knowledge about the past, but it is by no means complete.

Despite the many references to Norse and pagan historical figures, there is only one direct reference to a Norse god in the text, Ing, mentioned as part of one of Hrothgar's titles.⁴⁸ However, there are several mentions of ravens in the text and while the modern interpretation of ravens is a bad omen, it is important to remember that ravens were Odin's messengers and information gatherers in Norse myth.⁴⁹ Ravens were certainly considered auspicious as they appear on many talismans and charms throughout the centuries. Odin was not omniscient himself and relied on his ravens to bring him information about what was happening in his realm. For the ravens to be following Beowulf around in the narrative implies that 'someone' is extremely interested in the actions of the hero. There is also the case of Daeghrefn, the only human warrior Beowulf is explicitly mentioned to have killed in the text, whose name means "Day Raven". As Daeghrefn killed his uncle Hygelac, Beowulf avenges him in the narrative and is once again surrounded by the raven motif. From a pagan perspective, there is no doubt that the ravens' inclusion in the story was

⁴⁸ *eodor Ingwina* 'shelter of the Ing-friends', London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV line 1044.

⁴⁹ London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV line 1801, for example. Odin's ravens are named Huginn and Muninn.

deliberate and that Beowulf is being watched by the (now replaced) gods. By including these two clearly pagan elements in the existing manuscript, it shows while that Scribe One did attempt to make a Christian story with Beowulf as the tragic Christian hero, they were unable to remove all the parts from the original story thus making the version of *Beowulf* we know today.

Given the time period, it is possible that *Beowulf* was written for one of the new Christian kings of the era, taking a famous hero of the time and reinventing him for the new audience, but that is merely speculation at this point. If that were the case, it is likely that Scribe Two would have engaged in censorship and Christianization of the text as well. What remains clear is that Scribe One had a clear agenda in changing the text to form what they considered to be a superior version of a story they were clearly very fond of. Scribe One actively took a hero from another time to showcase the differences from the previous society and the current one. While Grendel is supposed to tie into the overarching theme of tragedy and kinkilling, Scribe One takes great care in removing references to the pagan past and Norse gods whenever they can unless they leave them in to prove a point. Such as the passage where the Danes pray and then offer sacrifices to pagan gods to highlight the differences between them and the ‘modern’ Christians who would be reading the text.⁵⁰ This is not only an indication of changing in the societal ideals during the time but also Scribe One’s feelings on the matter.

There are multiple additions to the text that could not have been there originally, all which reference God or the Almighty such as the passages ‘Such then was their custom, the hope of heathens; in their hearts They bore hell, they knew not the Creator, the Judge of all deeds—neither acknowledged the Lord, nor knew how to praise the Protector of

⁵⁰ *Hwilum hie geheton...wilnian!* London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV lines 175-188.

Heaven, the Ruler of Glory'⁵¹ which occurs when the Danes are suffering from Grendel's attacks. There is also the line 'it is a marvel to tell how mighty God in his ample spirit distributes to mankind wisdom, homeland and heroism. He has power over all things...' from a passage aptly known as 'Hrothgar's sermon' about the importance of good kingship and deeds and 'I give thanks words of thanks to the Lord of all, the King of Glory, eternal Ruler, for these adornments which I gaze on here, that I was able to acquire such things for my people before the moment of death...' indicates that Beowulf is a 'noble savage' by Scribe One's acknowledgement.⁵² By using these passages and the other references to Christianity, Scribe One shows Christian values through the mirror of paganism.

Continuing along in the vein of what would be a challenge for any historian attempting to date the piece, there are errors in the text where we cannot be sure who along the line made a mistake, harkening back to the text being a result of a centuries long game of transcribing, repeating, mistakes and transcribing again. Most famously, Grendel is referred to as explicitly being descended from Cain in the original manuscript.⁵³ While one Leonard Neidorf writes in his article "Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants, and the Textual Criticism of 'Beowulf'" extensively about how the scribe originally wrote 'Cam' before later altering it to 'Cain', though poetic analysis dictates that the original must have been 'Cam' as in Cam Esenus, otherwise known as Ham. This is an interesting case of bias on multiple levels because the modern reader cannot be sure if the choice of 'Cam' is the original and Scribe One changed it to 'Cain' or if it should have been 'Cain' from the start.⁵⁴ The fact that the

⁵¹ Swanton, *Beowulf*, p. 42

⁵² Swanton, *Beowulf*, p. 117, p. 169. For some more information for this specific case of the 'noble savage', see the introduction of Mitchell's translation, mentioned above, in particular pages xiv to xvii.

⁵³ *Caines cynne*, London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV line 107.

⁵⁴ Leonard Neidorf, "Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants, and the Textual Criticism of 'Beowulf'." *Studies in Philology* 112, no. 4 (2015): 599-632 (p. 603)

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/43921862>> [accessed 3 March 2020]

one of the Beowulf scribes, clearly devout *and* skilled enough to attempt to modify the text to suit their needs, could have made a mistake that would be as unthinkable to modern audiences is certainly hard to believe by modern standards. Cain is without a doubt, one of the most famous Biblical figures for modern audiences. To confuse him with a comparatively obscure figure like Ham indicates a large dissonance in values and the information that Scribe One could have accessed one thousand years ago.⁵⁵ Regardless of what Scribe One had intended, because of the Christianization in the text Grendel's original origins have been obscured, whatever they may have been.

There is no clear description of Grendel in the text, which lends credence to the theory that he may be intended to be more of a metaphor than an actual living being. He is described as a troll outside of the narrative, but the word does not appear in the manuscript itself.⁵⁶ Grendel and by extension his mother, in the form they appear in the Nowell Codex are intended to be the ultimate fears of Anglo-Saxon society: in particular kinkilling, incest, failure to pay *wergild* and the failure of said society to protect the victims of these crimes.⁵⁷ This is intentional. The Beowulf Poet is very diligent in creating their intended narrative of tragedy, specifically choosing incidents where the law has failed the families of the bereaved.⁵⁸

King Hrethel's case is deliberately chosen to highlight the gaps in these laws, acting from the point of view of a father whose son accidentally kills the other who is left with no way to assuage the pain of losing his child. He cannot demand *wergild* from his own family and choosing to execute his guilty son will cause him to lose his *other* child, as well as

⁵⁵ While Ham's story is infamous for supposedly justifying slavery, it still stands to reason that a non-Christian would recognize the name Cain before Ham's.

⁵⁶ Marx, *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature*, Unit 7, p. 6

⁵⁷ Marx, *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature*, Unit 7, pp. 4-5

⁵⁸ Unferth's existence in court and The Finn Episode are other excellent examples.

pinning him with the crime of killing his own child. In this sense, combining this agonizing corundum with the addition of being related to Cain, Grendel and his mother have the ability to shock and scare *both* audiences: the pagan Norse and the now-Christian Anglo-Saxons.⁵⁹ While the dragon of the final part of the story has traditionally been conflated with the Devil for centuries, Grendel and his mother function as much more nebulous figures making their true purpose not immediately clear to the average reader outside of being just a monster the hero must defeat. Without ample information about Grendel, a translator would have a difficult time in their attempts to explain that Grendel and his mother are the embodiments of all that the Anglo-Saxons feared.⁶⁰

Scribe One's work makes it clear on multiple levels how malleable the written word and history can be, when there is no oversight or anyone to contradict what is written down and there are no alternatives to understanding what the Beowulf Poet intended. The farther away the text gets from its original source, the harder it is to determine the true intent and meaning of the text and that assumes in that it has not been modified by either well-intentioned revisionists or for sinister means. If not for the diligent, accurate work of Scribe Two *Beowulf* may not have existed in its current form, if at all. The juxtaposition of Scribe One and Scribe Two's work makes it clear a story may become quite literally lost in translation if enough identifying factors such as spelling, historical references and cultural references are removed. For modern readers who have little to no context about the world *Beowulf* comes from, including that information both in the translation and as in the form of footnotes or a glossary is a necessity. What is essentially a simple story of monsters versus men becomes unnecessarily complicated and muddled on all levels thanks to its

⁵⁹ Joseph L Baird, "Grendel The Exile" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1966, pp. 375–381. *JSTOR*, <www.jstor.org/stable/43342315> [accessed 22 July 2020] p. 378.

⁶⁰ For more about the *wergild* system and law system designed to protect the people of the society, please check 'Laws of Ethelbert' and 'Laws of Wihtrud' available via William Marx's *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature*, unit 2.

complicated history from its conception to modern times. If one day we are able to get closer to the identity of the Beowulf Poet we would be able to declare with more certainty various aspects about the nature of the text but for now, this all we can do. *Beowulf* and its author remain with many mysteries and it is the job of the translators and editors of today to express this text's origins and idiosyncrasies.

3. The Modern Translations

Now that we have addressed the complicated history of the *Beowulf* manuscript, the translations that we have access to today have a much more accessible (and easier to read) format that has brought *Beowulf* into the recent era, allowing it to be enjoyed by people from all walks of life. We are now looking at modern translations done by accomplished scholars, going by accessibility, who the translators were, their word choices and whether or not there are errors that completely alter the meaning of the story.⁶¹ While there are many examples of alterations from the ‘original’ author present in the Nowell Codex, most of the obscurity of *Beowulf* now hinges on the bias of modern translators. It is impossible to eliminate all bias, but there is still much to be said about the translations that exist. While there have been several excellent translations into modern English of *Beowulf* over the years four stand out because they are easy to find: the Kirtlan, Tolkien, Heaney and Swanton translations. In most cases, the Heaney translation is generally considered to be the most accessible and has won the Whitbread Book of the Year award (later renamed Costa Book Award).⁶² But the Swanton translation is also noticeably clear in its prose, making it understandable even to those who do not understand much about the story.⁶³ Both books are the same size as an average novel as well, around two hundred pages, making them seem less daunting than Tolkien’s which has over four hundred. Both have text and facing translation on the left page and the modern translation on the other, allowing both casual readers and academics to read whichever version they desire. Options are never a bad thing! Predictably, both editions have an introduction to the text before the story proper but Heaney and Swanton use these to vastly different means. There is also the

⁶¹ In the case of massive errors, they will be discussed in the Key Passages section.

⁶² Costa Book Awards, *Costa Book Awards* (2020) < <https://www.costa.co.uk/behind-the-beans/costa-book-awards/book-awards> > [accessed 30 August 2020]. The Heaney translation is considered the standard version taught in most school districts in the USA.

⁶³ Swanton, *Beowulf*, back cover review.

Kirtlan edition, which is probably the edition that will come up immediately online if someone is simply looking into a free e-book version for academic or leisurely reasons.⁶⁴

Kirtlan's edition is the earliest of these four and has the great benefit of being available online via the Gutenberg Project completely for free. Not only does it have a brief introduction, but also has clickable footnotes that allow the reader to click, read the information contained within and click back to the spot in the text that they left off. Its ease of use makes it a strong contender for best edition, solely for this reason.

Unfortunately, this convenient digital edition was most certainly not the original format of the book, as the Kirtlan translation was published in the year 1913. However, like Tolkien's edition, it does not have the Old English text available for side-by-side comparison. The prose is occasionally muddy and unclear as well, using too many inverted sentences that can cloud the meaning of the passages.⁶⁵ We also do not know much of anything about Kirtlan as a person. He must have been a scholar as he is mentioned a translator of a Translation of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' as cited in his byline in this edition, but there is little else known about him.⁶⁶ Given that this edition was published over a century ago and many other translations of these two works have been made since, it is not surprising there would not be much information about him available. Kirtlan himself does not supply much information about himself in the introduction to the work though he does supply plenty of insight that he understands the world of *Beowulf* quite well, which makes some of his translation choices rather baffling.

⁶⁴ Ernest J. B. Kirtlan/The Gutenberg Project, *The Story Of Beowulf*, (1913) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/50742/50742-h/50742-h.htm>> [accessed 5 June 2020]. The online version was produced by Jeroen Hellingman and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

⁶⁵ While the translation is understandable in most cases, there are some odd passages that are needlessly complicated. See part IV. 'Then one of the warriors turned his horse round, and spake this word: 'Time it is for me to go. May the Almighty Father hold you in favour, and keep you in safety in all your journeyings. I will go to the sea-coast to keep my watch against the fierce troops.' Was Beowulf and his party joined by yet another soldier? The speaker is supposed to be the sea coast guard, yet it sounds like 1) one of Beowulf's companions is suddenly leaving or 2) they were joined by yet another guard.

⁶⁶ Kirtlan, *Beowulf*, inner cover.

Knowing who the translator is an important part of knowing why someone would make various choices in the translation process and could have given us insight into why Kirtlan chose some of the words and passages that he did. But without any information we cannot determine what his intent was.

The biggest issue one could have, barring word choice that changes the entire meaning of the text, is Kirtlan's choice in spelling. Kirtlan chooses to render terms like 'wyrd' and 'Heorot' as 'Weird' and 'Hart'. While these terms are not incorrect in their usage in the manuscript, the choice in spelling can create a conflicting image if it does not give the reader pause entirely. While 'Hart' (Old English for 'stag') is the correct meaning of 'Heorot' and has a long tradition of stags being associated with royalty in Scandinavian tradition, it is one letter off and the exact same pronunciation of 'heart'. While the usage of 'heart' in this case would be a fine parallel in that Heorot is the 'heart' of Hrothgar's people, it also gives the impression of hope, when the rest of the story spends most of its time framing the narrative in such a way that it makes it clear that *Beowulf* is not going to be a hopeful or remotely happy story. Even though things do end happily for Hrothgar and his people in this story, the narrative makes sure to hint at true events in the future that will come to pass in the slaughter of Hrothgar's children by his brother. Choosing to render it as 'hart' muddles the overall impression of the great hall of Heorot. If Kirtlan wanted to make the stag and the image of royalty first and foremost, simply directly translating it as 'stag' or with a footnote indicating its meaning would be a far cleaner and direct way to express the meaning of the hall's significance.

Kirtlan's other spelling choice is the decision to render the term *wyrd* as 'weird' which of course to any English speaker means something different from the intent of *wyrd*. While 'weird' does have a history of being used in this manner in the past, particularly the Weird Sisters in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it does not work as

well in this context. While the use of 'weird' for the Weird Sisters helps drive home just how strange or bizarre they are, it does not have the same effect in Kirtlan's translation. While Kirtlan does go to lengths to explain 'weird' in his introduction and what exactly it is, even addressing it as 'Fate' the insistence of spelling it with its more modern spelling just confuses the reader and puts their thoughts elsewhere. While the events of *Beowulf* are 'weird' in both the fated and the strange sense, using it in this way reads oddly especially when referring to 'the will of weird'. Changing the spelling to the more archaic *wyrd* not only helps the reader separate the weird from the *wyrd* but also allows for a separate meaning of *wyrd* that includes the concept of fate and strangeness without causing the reader to instantly think of the word 'weird' in the modern sense. The other option of course, would be to simply render the word as 'Fate', which at this point is divorced far enough from the classical Greek meaning of the Three Fates to be a neutral word that indicates a concept. In this case, to preserve the Anglo-Saxon meaning, *Wyrd* would be the best choice, but both would work fine.

Swanton's 1997 edition is mostly informative, with the intent to explain the complexities of translating a poetic structure that does not exist anymore into modern English. His translation comes from a background of a scholar with many articles and translations about Anglo-Saxon culture published. His translation is the clearest in terms of prose, allowing the reader to understand the gravity of the situations that the characters go through. He is a very careful writer, and goes out of his way explain the dilemma of word choice such as on pages 28 and 29, mentioning his deliberate removal of words such as 'knight' and 'lord' where possible which evoke a different meaning of chivalry that would not have been present in the poem during the time it was written and certainly not during the time the story would have taken place. He does mention regretfully that his other choices are also loaded words, saying that 'warrior' and 'chief' has connotations to

Native Americans and African (Zulu) tribes but this is a failing of the modern English language. It is his duty to choose words that are closest to the original meaning and notes that it would be beneficial to see these words in a more positive context.⁶⁷ The fact that he is aware of the connotations of his word choices and makes note of them indicates Swanton has some idea of the weight of his word choices which is heartening. He does not make any mention of his own heritage in the book itself, and the only indication of the author as a person is the dedication to his parents at the beginning of the story which simply quotes Bede. It is impossible to tell exactly, but there seems to be a low level of translator bias in this edition. The intended audience is scholarly, with the original Old English on one side and the translation on the other, but still clear enough that anyone could pick it up and read with little difficulty.

Heaney's edition does not differ much from Swanton's. Published in 2000, it has an introduction about the history and background of *Beowulf*, like one would expect. However, the preface about Heaney's experiences translating the poem is much more personal and individualized, putting emphasis on his own Irish heritage. Page xxvii mentions that as he considered how he wanted his translation to sound, he decided that he wanted it to sound like it was being told by one of his relatives and as such incorporated old Irish words into the translation such as 'graith' (lines 324 & 2988) and 'hoked' (line 3026) rather than the more contemporary words 'harness' and 'rooted about'. This does have an interesting slant to it in that the word choices occasionally sound like they are an attempt to establish a meter to the poem but does make the language a little more inaccessible to more casual readers. Given the long and bloody history between England and Ireland, one cannot blame him for choosing to translate *Beowulf* in a way that is more accessible to him and his family and certainly from the several pages of praise for the

⁶⁷ Swanton, *Beowulf*, pp. 28-29.

edition at the beginning at the beginning of the book indicate that many others agree. Bias, in this case, is not necessarily a bad thing. Like Swanton, the Heaney translation aims to be accessible to both scholars and new readers, providing footnotes, background information the original text and the translation side by side, which has surely contributed to its fame.

The Tolkiens' volume is on a completely different scale compared to the others. It also has the most confusing history. The Tolkien manuscript was completed early compared to Swanton and Heaney's in the year 1926! Barely ten years after Kirtlan's. However, for whatever reason, it was not published until 2015. Possibly to 'make up' for this, the commentary, footnotes and other extra material renders Tolkien's book massive, almost the size of a phone book. It even contains *another* story within it, what can basically be considered JRR Tolkien's *Beowulf* fanfiction/reconstruction *Sellic Spell*, automatically making it seem like much more to read even when the poem itself is little more than one hundred pages. It does not have a divide between the Old English and modern translation like Swanton and Heaney's, making it appear to be much more of an 'original' Tolkien work instead of something he has translated. It also has the added detriment of three levels of bias: the Beowulf Poet's, JRR Tolkien's, and Christopher Tolkien's. While the impact of the Beowulf Poet (and the Scribes) have already discussed, we cannot possibly know what JRR Tolkien was thinking when he wrote this particular translation. We have to rely on Christopher Tolkien's commentary and there are at times parts where he does not seem to know what his father was thinking either.⁶⁸ JRR Tolkien's translation is extremely flowery, and while it aims to emulate the feeling

⁶⁸ Christopher Tolkien does, as he should, go into great detail about how he put this translation together from his father's manuscripts, citing three sources by his father that he refers to as B(i), B(ii) and C respectively. It stands to reason to wonder why he did not just start with 'A'? He also admits to making mistakes reading his own father's writing thanks to JRR's notoriously difficult handwriting. The entire section of the book is an interesting look at the editing process and can be read from page 2-11, with emphasis on page 3 about JRR's handwriting.

of the poem's rhythm, it easily feels overwhelming on top of its in-depth and extremely long commentary added by his son, Christopher.⁶⁹ It also suffers from effectively being an incomplete work and to his credit, Christopher Tolkien details his methods clearly for the reader, explaining how his father had three separate manuscripts of his translation completed long ago but had never published it.⁷⁰

Some of the translation choices are suspect, such as specifically using the term 'Middle-Earth'.⁷¹ It would be one thing if this term was used by any other writer besides Tolkien, but thanks to Tolkien's legacy it is nearly impossible to disassociate the connotations of the term 'Middle Earth' from anything other than *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The term 'Middle Earth' conjures images of a fantastical world beyond our own with elves, dwarves, and monsters, when in the reality of the *Beowulf* epic it simply refers to the known world. The term when used in this poem makes the world of *Beowulf* sound far more like a high fantasy story instead of it being far closer to modern magical realism.

Tolkien's worldbuilding bias aside, there is generally less care in his word choices. Tolkien's translation is shaped by his religion, resulting in a significant loss of accuracy due to his Catholic bias. While Swanton deliberately avoids using words that will give the wrong impression, such as 'knight' and 'lord' and Heaney uses some deliberately archaic Irish word choices as a way of reclaiming the text, Tolkien shows far less care. Considering that this translation was supposedly completed decades before the other two manuscripts (1926) it is not entirely surprising that Tolkien would not have thought as much about the implications of using words such as 'lord' and 'king' but at the

⁶⁹ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary Together With Sellic Spell*, p. 141-143. The footnote here is a single footnote about the famous 'whale's road' line in the poem and why it is incorrect. There are also gregarious footnotes about CS Lewis' involvement, for absolutely no reason whatsoever. For example, see page 109.

⁷⁰ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, pp. 1-11.

⁷¹ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, p. 15, line 60.

same time this seems rather odd, since this was part of his job as a researcher and a professor. On page 18 line 140 is one of the famous examples of pagan religion that the Beowulf Poet did not remove stating that the people “vowed sacrifices to idols in their heathen tabernacles”, completely missing the fact that the word ‘tabernacle’ has a Christian origin, specifically for evangelists and Catholics, of which JRR Tolkien was Roman Catholic!⁷² There is the possibility that Tolkien was attempting to show the savageness of the pagans compared to his ‘better’ religion, but it seems odd for him to do so as he appears to have real fondness for *Beowulf*, and *It* has nothing to do with the ancient pagan traditions of the worship of Odin or another Norse god. There are several other choices that could be used in this case, such as ‘shrine’, ‘temple’ or even ‘altar’. Given Tolkien’s faith, it is unlikely he thought much more about it than that. What is particularly odd is that Christopher Tolkien, despite going on extensively about this passage’s precise idiosyncrasies also does not pause to question the usage of the word ‘tabernacle’.⁷³

The use of the word ‘heathen’ is also suspect, though not limited to only Tolkien in this case. Both Kirtlan and Swanton also use the word in their translations, though interestingly Heaney does not and opts for the use of ‘pagan’ instead. ‘Heathen’ is derogatory today and may not have been the best choice for the heroes of the story who by accounts are considered heroic and good. ‘Pagan’ is considerably less loaded and refers to persons who hold different beliefs than the major world religions and belief systems. Given that the Beowulf Poet themselves was trying to emphasize the contrast between the old days and the ‘modern’ time he was living in it places an uncomfortable emphasis on the ‘us vs. them’ mentality and the idea that the Danes would not have any

⁷² ‘*hærgtrafum*’, London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV line 75. Translated by Swanton and Kirtlan as ‘heathen shrines’, Heaney as ‘pagan shrines’. The term *hearg* or *hörgr* is found in various Norse works, such as *Beowulf*, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*.

⁷³ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary Together With Sellic Spell*, p. 169-181.

trouble if they simply worshipped the ‘correct’ god. This is deliberate on the Beowulf Poet’s part as it shows that they are not only aware of the pagan past, but their inclusion of the scene indicates that they kept it in deliberately precisely so they should show this contrast of old vs. new when it would likely have not been in the original version that came into existence around the 700s. It then becomes up to the translators to decide which word they choose to use for their manuscript. Given the Beowulf Poet’s dedication to removing most overt references to the pagan past (except for when he did not understand or missed the reference entirely) I do think that ‘heathen’ could be the ‘correct’ choice in this case even though ‘pagan’ would suit the message of the work just fine. When considering the story would have taken place there would not have been any mention of ‘pagan’ rituals, only that there were rituals to stop Grendel that failed. Since there is no evidence of an earlier manuscript, it would not be odd to assume that the original intention of the story (or rather, folklore) would have been that Beowulf himself was the answer to their prayers. Keeping this in mind, the more neutral and less derogatory ‘pagan’ seems far more appropriate.

Combined with the lack of the original text as well as unnecessary and baffling footnotes about *The Silmarillion*, it is easy to see who exactly the intended audience is for Tolkien’s translation: *The Lord of the Rings* fans and no one else. The usage of ‘Middle-Earth’ in the text almost seems to serve as a way for Christopher Tolkien to give more legitimacy to his father’s vast magical world that he just borrowed almost entirely from Old English folklore in the first place, and then welded it into his own mythos. It is a shame as the translation itself is very beautiful but the poem is only a small fraction of the actual book, making it a daunting task for new readers and while full of helpful information for scholars, does not actually have the original text meaning they would need another version just to look at the Old English!

While the word choices of each edition are important, it is easy to see that some readers would consider this to be nitpicking. Each of these translation samples will give a different impression of the story from their setup and format alone, and while their word choices may seem inconsequential, they are important for forming an appropriate image of the setting and world that any story takes place in. To do so would potentially remove the story from its historical context. While it may not mean much to some, those that are familiar with history would certainly take issue with a Welsh story changed to an English setting, for example. Simply reducing *Beowulf* to a 'Viking story' would completely change the meaning and significance of Beowulf coming to aid the Danes, the historical context in which dooms Hrothgar's family in the end and so on.

4. Key Passages

As briefly discussed above, word choice plays a crucial role in world building and imagery for any text. Assigning a time period in which the story is supposed to take place is an important part of choosing the terms used in the story. Doing so will allow the translator to give correct historical information about the story, the characters and people mentioned in the story and their significance. Simply referring to Beowulf and the Geats as “Vikings” is an overly simplistic description both because of where they originate and the expectations that a modern reader brings to the table. Even now, misinformation and outdated concepts about the Vikings abound and accurately determining when the story took place originally can help a reader understand that this story took place long before the ‘golden age’ of Vikings and dispel pop culture images that convey little to no historical information. If this is not done, then *Beowulf* is a simple story about a man who does battle with monsters and enemy countries on his journey to become king. This hinges on the cultural context of the word. For example, the word ‘knight’ will give readers a very different image than the word ‘samurai’ and the philosophy behind these two groups of warriors even though on many levels the two groups are not very different from each other. A basic ‘knight in love with a beautiful lady’ vs a ‘samurai in love with a beautiful lady’ are not that different in terms of story and theme but would have different connotations depending on the audience. Loyalty and tragedy would be understandable to the average reader if one term were substituted for the other. Some of the choices discussed previously may be annoying for an informed reader; they do not prevent an uninformed reader from reading what is in front of them. Ultimately, they do not detract from the meaning or theme of the story. However, there are situations where the word choices change the meaning of the story entirely and can be crucial in forming the readers’ impression of the plot for the worse. It is when these word choices conceal or

prevent a reader from understanding there starts to become a problem. Given that most readers are not going to be reading multiple translations, these are the parts of the story that absolutely must be translated accurately otherwise their impressions of the text will be forever impacted.⁷⁴

There are two major passages we will be focusing on for this paper. These errors do not exist in the majority of available English translations but they do exist in the most accessible ones. The Kirtlan translation is available entirely online via the Gutenberg Project and the Tolkien translation is one of the most recent publications. Tolkien's popularity and academic reputation gives him additional authority, meaning that a contemporary reader is likely to reach for one of these two translations. However, these two translations (despite Tolkien's being published in 2015) are also old compared to the more recent versions such as Heaney or Swanton, with Tolkien's translation being about 90 years old and Kirtlan's over 100. As a result, the reader must be prepared for outdated interpretations and translation conventions, which may not be immediately obvious due to the accessibility of these two editions and could end up confusing a new reader more. Likewise, the age of the translations means that the new research and discoveries about Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavian cultures is not accounted for or considered, the result being that the required cultural context for making sense of the poem is simply not up to contemporary standards. One key example is that Beowulf as a character is now believed to be a potentially real person and no longer the realm of pure fantasy which is something that would not have been considered at the time these two editions were translated.⁷⁵ This

⁷⁴ This is, in fact, my theory as to why so many odd adaptations of *Beowulf* exist today but that has nothing to do with this for now.

⁷⁵ Christopher Tolkien talks in length about Beowulf and Beow being part of a 'fairy-story' on page 147 in the commentary of *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary with Sellic Spell*. See also, the belief that *The Iliad* was widely considered to be purely mythological with no historical basis whatsoever until the discovery of Troy.

also means that the footnotes available in the editions are outdated, such as Christopher Tolkien insisting that Beowulf is a purely fantastical character with no historical basis whatsoever when there is now a plausible theory that the burial mound at Skulunda, Sweden is the resting place of Beowulf.⁷⁶ There is also a lack of critical thinking about the story and themes. It is this combination of age and accessibility that render these translations so awkward in the current era versus their initial reception.

The two excerpts are passages that when added into the narrative completely change the meaning of the story. They are, in a sense, a thirty-second stinger at the end of the credits of a movie. Interestingly, both have to do with Beowulf's sexuality (or lack thereof). The first being from the Tolkien edition, page 65:

The aged Scylding with grey-sprinkled hair desired to seek his bed. Longing immeasurably sweet for rest there took the Geatish knight, bold bearer of the shield. Straightway there led him forth, that man of distant folk now weary of his quest, a chamberlain who in courtesy to the knight's need ministered, in such things as in that day were due for men on warlike errantry to have. (lines 1505-1509)

The second passage from Kirtlan's edition, taking place during Beowulf's funeral:

And unhappy in their thinkings, and with minds full of care, they proclaim the death of their lord, likewise a sorrowful song the Bride.... (part XLIII)

What the Beowulf Poet intended for Beowulf as a character we cannot know for sure, but Scribe One absolutely wanted Beowulf to embody some ideals of their new, Christian God and Jesus Christ. Beowulf, despite being a brave warrior with many victories under his belt and showing a keen sense of political knowledge, is not married nor does he have

⁷⁶ Beowulf is killed at a place known as Earnanæs in the poem, which is known as Aranäs today in modern Sweden. There is an unexcavated burial mound there. London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV line 3031. While it is mentioned in the notes section on page 128 of Tolkien's edition, there is no mention of its significance nor possible real-life location.

children. This is a key point at the end of the poem where Beowulf dies without leaving an heir or someone to take his place. The Beowulf Poet sets this up in such a way to make it clear to the listener that the Geats are doomed despite Beowulf's otherworldly (or blessed) strength and good heart. The feeling of doom hangs over the entire poem and finally drops on the audience at the end with good reason.

As previously discussed in this paper, Scribe One was dedicated to altering the poem to create a more Christian version of the text. The result was a highly edited version of Beowulf that made Scribe One's biases and goals clear, especially in contrast to Scribe Two's more direct approach that did nothing of the sort. J.R.R. Tolkien's goal of reconstructing the Beowulf text to what he understood to be its purer and more accurate form creates an interesting editorial parallel to Scribe One, especially considering the fact that Tolkien was well-known as a Roman Catholic himself. In addition, Tolkien's knowledge of folklore and academic skill makes his translation of the passage regarding Hrothgar and Beowulf retiring after the party so strange. "the aged Scylding with grey-sprinkled hair desired to seek his bed....there took the Geatish knight...a chamberlain who in courtesy to the knight's need ministered".⁷⁷ This is a baffling passage just on its own. Just what is happening here? Taken out of context, there is almost no way to realize that there are three characters in this scene, not two, due to how vague and flowery the prose is. What this scene *should* convey is that during the party, Hrothgar decides he is ready to retire for the evening and goes to his bedchamber. Beowulf, also deciding he would like to turn in for the night, asks a servant for directions to his guest room and goes to sleep. Due to the way the Tolkien version is worded, either due to poetic sense or just sheer incompetence, the implication is that Beowulf has gone to sleep with Hrothgar

⁷⁷ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, p. 65.

himself. This is not what was written in the original, not what would have been intended by the Beowulf Poet, nor is it present in any of the other translations.⁷⁸ This passage's translation creates multiple unfortunate implications for the rest of the poem.

It would be one thing if the implication of homosexuality was intentional, foreshadowing the fact that Beowulf will not have any children by the end of the poem, due to his illicit relationship with a man considerably older than him: but this is not the case. If such a plotline existed in the original, it would have been removed by the Beowulf Poet or Scribe One and would never have made it to the light of day as it would have been at odds with the teachings of the Church. In attempting to make Beowulf (presumably) a virgin, the scribes, particularly Scribe One, created deliberate parallels between him and Christ who also never married or had children. This concept of using older pagan motifs in a new, Christian light is not unheard of in Anglo-Saxon literature and dream poetry, such as *The Dream of the Rood*.⁷⁹

One of the oldest Old English poems *The Dream of the Rood* uses its depiction of the crucifixion in a stark contrast to the classical biblical version in which Jesus Christ's suffering and tribulations with clear references to Anglo-Saxon symbolic motifs. Instead it chooses to depict Jesus as a powerful Anglo-Saxon warrior who willingly gives himself up for his people "The young warrior, strong and resolute, stripped himself...when he would redeem humanity" with the Rood acting as his retainer to see that his final wish is carried out, "I trembled when the warrior embraced me; however I did not dare bow to the earth, to fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand firm" much like Beowulf's heroic sacrifice at the end of the poem, with Wiglaf as his loyal

⁷⁸ *Geat wæs glæmod...habban scoldon*, London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV lines 1785-1798.

⁷⁹ Michael Swanton, *The Dream Of The Rood*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978).

retainer.⁸⁰ Given its tentative dating of 800 CE it is possible that it was the inspiration for the Beowulf Poet to turn Beowulf into a messianic hero. There are many other parallels as well, such as the use of multiple narrators, the depiction of the Rood surrounded by jewels and treasure:

That beacon was encrusted with gold; beautiful jewels shone out of the surface of the earth” and “...soaked with the flowing of blood; sometimes it was adorned with treasure” which sound similar to the depiction of the dragon’s hoard at the end of the poem “then, passing by the seat, that young knight proudhearted, filled with the joy of victory, beheld a host of hoarded jewels, gold glistening that lay upon the ground, marvelous things upon the wall.”⁸¹

The similarities of *The Dream of the Rood* and *Beowulf* continue with the narrative framing of using multiple point of view characters in the story and using stories within stories to drive the theme home. For example, the use of the dream narrative of the dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood* and the multiple tragic stories in *Beowulf* such as the story of Sigemund and the ‘Finn Episode’. Both pieces use the narrative framing to appeal emotionally to the audience, using the methods of dramatic irony, tension, and the emotional turmoil of the characters to express the themes of the story. While *The Dream of the Rood* uses this to invigorate the primary narrator, in *Beowulf* the Finn Episode is yet another portion of the story the Beowulf Poet uses to express the theme of the tragedy and suffering of Anglo-Saxon society. Given these parallels, Tolkien’s translation choice becomes a glaring issue and something he should have been well-aware of, even if it was not his intent in making this depiction.

The hypothetical tryst also adds uncomfortable elements to the relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf, such as when the former announced his intent to

⁸⁰ Swanton, *The Dream Of The Rood*, lines 35-45.

⁸¹ Swanton, *The Dream Of The Rood*, lines 1-12, Swanton, *The Dream Of The Rood*, lines 13-23 & Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary Together with Sellic Spell*, p. 93.

symbolically adopt Beowulf as a gesture of gratitude for his great deeds. Considering Beowulf has just completed defeating the two embodiments of evil and Anglo-Saxon fears all rolled into one, kinkilling and incest, this paints a very awkward picture. That Beowulf would sleep with someone who is now an honorary father figure and mentor completely undoes the symbolism of killing Grendel and his mother. It detracts from the messiah image for Beowulf that the Beowulf Poet spent a considerable amount of time creating, even adding heavenly light to the scene where Beowulf slays Grendel's Mother to further the point. Despite how attractive or forward-thinking it may be to assume a romantic relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf exists or is implied to exist, it does not make any sense within the context of the story.

The second passage of dubious word choice is Kirtlan's word choice for the phrase that is usually translated as 'a Geatish woman' or 'women'. 'And unhappy in their thinkings, and with minds full of care, they proclaim the death of their lord, likewise a sorrowful song the Bride....'⁸² This section, as it exists in our earliest written sources, is in extremely bad condition, rendering it difficult to read for any scholar. Even Christopher Tolkien's otherwise extensive footnotes regulate this section to a single (albeit long) footnote.⁸³ This means that translation of this section can vary greatly, although the action within is straightforward as it relates to Beowulf's funeral. Where the issue sets in is in the beginning of part XLIII when Kirtlan uses the word 'bride'. The use of the word bride is not only baffling in this context, so much so that all modern translations of *Beowulf* to come after having opted to translate this line as a 'Geatish woman' or 'maiden' or even multiple women. Given the fact that this scene is a funeral for a king, it makes sense that there would be multiple women present at his funeral. Only

⁸² Kirtlan, *The Story Of Beowulf*, part XLIII.

⁸³ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, pp.50-353.

one is odd. Even if we assume that the translation of ‘bride’ is correct, it makes little sense to make her the bride of an aged king when in Anglo-Saxon culture there was no requirement for the crown to be passed down through one's children (though not unheard of).⁸⁴ While there is the possibility of the symbolism of a new bride's life starting on the same day as one life ends, or what is typically considered the happiest day of a woman's life is marked with tragedy, would make for some wonderful irony if it was at all intended in the original text.

Not only do Geatish women make sense in this context but choosing to translate the line as ‘bride’ has disturbing implications both within the text and outside of it. Christopher Tolkien notes that one of JRR Tolkien's manuscripts mention ‘his lady aged’ proving that Tolkien nearly identified the woman/women as Queen Hygd as well.⁸⁵ If the woman mentioned is supposed to be Queen Hygd, at the base level her advanced age could explain why Beowulf is without an heir so many years after taking the throne. However, this would be impossible as Hygd is Beowulf's aunt, and she was married to Hygelac, the uncle and king that Beowulf took vengeance for by killing Daeghrefn. The implication that Beowulf would be in an incestuous relationship with his aunt is not only disturbing but improbable given that the Beowulf Poet goes out of their way to emphasize all of Grendel's faults from the kinslaying to his origins as a ‘descendant of Cain’ as a foil to Beowulf. Much like the problem of Tolkien accidentally implying Beowulf having a homosexual relationship with Hrothgar, it makes little sense for the woman in question

⁸⁴ Hygd offers the throne to Beowulf after the death of Hygelac, not trusting her son through Hygelac to be a good ruler. Beowulf refuses initially and does not become king until her son dies. The passage emphasizes both Hygd's abilities as a wise ruler in her own right and Beowulf's modesty. London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV lines 2367-2390.

⁸⁵ Tolkien, *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary*, p. 129.

to be Hygd. The issue is that the translation choices specifically undermine one of the primary points of the poem due to sheer carelessness.

But what if the 'bride' was not Hygd but a different woman? Even if the woman was supposed to be a bride for Beowulf, why wouldn't Beowulf himself, the members of the court or the narrator mention that they were preparing for a wedding? Surely such an auspicious event for the kingdom would be mentioned at least by the narration! The reason for this is that there is no wedding and the choice to translate this line as bride specifically clashes with the Beowulf Poet's intent to portray Beowulf as a messiah. The Beowulf Poet spends a lot of time setting up Beowulf as the savior of his people right down to his heroic sacrifice which heralds the doom and persecution of his people much like Jesus and the later persecution of Christians, something the Beowulf Poet would have been familiar with, as accounts of martyrdom were popular within the oral tradition and written down as teaching tools for their church congregations. It would not make sense for Beowulf to have a wife and children in this narrative, even if he may have in earlier versions of the story because Jesus did not. Furthermore, Beowulf is not shown to have any interest in women over the course of the story. While this may be because Beowulf does not interact with any women who are not someone he is related to or are already married it seems more likely that given the messianic angle he is deliberately abstaining from interactions with them. The narration does not even mention the first time Freawaru appears in the story (Swanton, line 2020f) and it is not until Beowulf himself is relating his adventure to his uncle that the reader even knows she exists, supporting that he is deliberately avoiding women, or perhaps is completely uninterested in them.

By translating the word as ‘bride’ it not only erases the framing of Beowulf as the messiah but invites unpleasant implications that Beowulf is following in the footsteps of Grendel and not the Jesus-figure that the Beowulf Poet so clearly wanted to draw parallels to. It not only changes the implications of the ending of the story, but also undoes much of what the story is trying to do with its theme of tragedy. Beowulf cannot have a wife because the existence of a wife could imply hope for the future in the sense of an heir or a hero. There are many stories and myths of heroes being born after their fathers (sometimes both parents) are killed and the child eventually becomes great hero and saviour to their oppressed people.⁸⁶ It remains to this day as a popular trope in modern fantasy novels. It would not be unheard of for a child of Beowulf to be born in such a fashion if it did not contradict the entire narrative up until this point. There cannot be a hero who could come to the Geats’ aid in the future during their time of dire peril because by this point, the Geats were gone and the Beowulf Poet knew this. The Geats were either wiped out entirely or assimilated into the conquering nations’ populaces and by making it clear that Beowulf has no wife or children, it reinforces the dismal tragic framing of the story.

If a reader has read these two versions of *Beowulf*, one can see how they would get a very different impression of what the story is supposed to be about. Reading Kirtlan’s edition, one might believe that despite the constant messages of doom and gloom have been circumvented by the efforts of the hero of the story, and that an heir to the throne will exist someday in the future especially with the common (and popular!) trend of the ‘chosen one’ in fantasy novels. Both Tolkien and Kirtlan’s versions contain errors that alter the entire meaning of the story. Kirtlan’s version has a far less grievous

⁸⁶ The birth of Zeus, the legend of Romulus and Remus, the *Harry Potter* series are some examples. They frequently overlap with the feral child raised by animals trope, which would tie into Beowulf’s supposed folkloric origins as The Bear Son.

errors, but nonetheless interferes with the themes that are painstakingly set up through the efforts of the Poet. Tolkien's translation is potentially dangerous minefield that could be used to radicalize someone against homosexuality who simply picked up the book because it had a famous person's name on the title. A translator needs to mind an incredible amount of detail to create a workable translation in its own right, but also needs to make sure that it makes sense in the world that the story is set in. Failing to do so will irrevocably alter the perceptions of new readers and annoy long time readers at best or force them to write an entire dissertation about it at worst.

5. Conclusion

One cannot simply pass off these trends of retelling stories with alternative interpretations as existing in a vacuum. They, like all literature and art, are a product of the society that they came from. That is not to say that Maria Dahvana's 'translation' of *Beowulf* is not an engaging story in its own right, nor does that make Neil Gaiman's short stories incorrect or wrong. The existence of these derivative works does indicate the importance of introducing a story with a translation that is not only readable but also displays the context needed for understanding why the story was written down in the first place. While they may be enjoyable as stories, one has to wonder if their audience will truly grasp the themes of tragedy and loss that the *Beowulf* Poet works so hard to frame the narrative with at nearly every single part of the story. At the same time, the tendency for modern writers to 'fix' old myths to better suit their needs can come off as hollow, especially in the case of *Beowulf* which, thanks to its deliberate and careful narrative framing using both famous myths and historical events, is supposed to be providing a critique of the Anglo-Saxon society that it hails from. Acting as though the *Beowulf* Poet was not aware of what they were doing and supplanting their message to insert one of their own is gravely insulting. Modern societies are not the only ones capable of critique. Looking to Tolkien, one might read the passage about Hrothgar and Beowulf as the reason why Beowulf has no children by the end of the story, that his illicit relationship with his new father figure is what has doomed his entire country fifty years down the road or even worse, interpret it as either demonizing homosexuality or justifying the persecution of homosexuality. Given the tendency of ultra-conservative groups and hate groups to appropriate Norse culture, this makes Tolkien's translation more problematic than would appear at the start. The issue is far greater than someone misinterpreting Grendel's purpose in the narrative or starting the poem with 'bro' instead of something

more traditionally accepted. It is the duty and responsibility of translators to make works that will benefit the bulk of human society, with the audience of scholars *and* the casual reader.

Bibliography

Baird, Joseph L., "Grendel The Exile" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1966, pp. 375–381. <www.jstor.org/stable/43342315> [accessed 22 July 2020]

Christensen, Arne S., 'Beowulf, Hygelac Og Chlochlaihus. Om Beretningskronologien I Beowulf', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, Issue 105, no. 1, February 2013, <<https://tidsskrift.dk/historisktidsskrift/article/view/56158>> [Accessed 26 August 2020] [Danish]

Center for Hellenistic Studies, Harvard University, *Beowulf and Oral Epic Tradition* <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6275.4-beowulf-and-oral-epic-tradition#n.*> [accessed 5 May 2020]

Costa Book Awards, *Costa Book Awards* <<https://www.costa.co.uk/behind-the-beans/costa-book-awards/book-awards>> [accessed 30 August 2020]

London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV (The Nowell Codex)

Davis, Nicola, *Beowulf The Work Of Single Author, Research Suggests* (2019) <theguardian.com> [accessed 20 May 2019]

Dobbie, Elliot, V.K., *Beowulf And Judith* (New York: Columbia University, 1953)

Gaiman, Neil, *Fragile Things* (New York: William Morrow, 2006)

Gaiman, Neil, *Smoke And Mirrors: Short Fictions And Illusions* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2001)

Gardner, John, *Grendel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971)

Headley, Maria D., 'This is a Beowulf Translation draft finishing face. She got a little unavoidably delayed - but she's out next year from @mcdbooks/@fsgbooks and my friends, the first word of my translation is "Bro." Also the dragon is a she. Others have gendered her. Why not me? Get ready.' [https://twitter.com/MARIADAHVANA/status/1114344048465080320?s=20] (@MARIADAHVANA, 06/04/2019)

Heaney, Seamus, *Beowulf A New Verse Translation* (W.W. Norton and & Company, 2000)

Kiernan, Kevin, *Electronic Beowulf* Archived the Wayback Machine Third Edition, "Thorkelin Transcripts." (2011) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20110629051334/http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/transcriptscollations/overview#thk>> [Accessed 5 May 2020]

Kirtlan, Ernest J. B., *The Story Of Beowulf*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1913) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/50742/50742-h/50742-h.htm>> [accessed 5 June 2020]

The Latin Library, *Gregory of Tours, Decem Libri Historiarum III* <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/gregorytours.html>> [accessed 15 May 2020] [Latin]

Marx, William, *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature* (School of Cultural Studies Department of English, University of Wales Trinity St. David Lampeter, no date given)

Mitchell, Stephen, *Beowulf* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017)

Neidorf, Leonard, 'Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants, and the Textual Criticism of 'Beowulf'', *Studies in Philology* 112, no. 4 (2015): 599-632 (p. 603)
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/43921862>> [accessed 3 March 2020]

Orchard, Andy, *Liber Monstrorum* <web.archive.org> (2005) [Accessed 30 June 2020]

Orchard, Andy, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*. (University of Toronto Press, 1995) <www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287xc6> [accessed 26 Aug. 2020]

Sorrell, Paul, *Oral Tradition: Oral History And The World Of Beowulf* (1992)
<https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/7i/5_sorrell.pdf> [accessed 13 June 2020]

Swanton, Michael, *Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)

Swanton, Michael, *The Dream Of The Rood*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978)

Thundy, Zacharius P., 'Beowulf: Date and Authorship', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* Vol. 87, No. 1 (1986), 102-116 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43343721>> [Accessed 13 July 2020]

Tolkien, J.R.R., *Beowulf A Translation And Commentary With Sellic Spell* (Harper Collins: Great Britain, 2014)

Tolkien, J.R.R., *Beowulf: The Monsters And The Critics*, 1997 edn. (London: Oxford University Press)

Tyler Royall, *The Tale Of Genji*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York: Viking, 2001)

Zemeckis, Robert (dir.), *Beowulf* [Film], (USA & UK: ImageMover and Shangri-La Entertainment, 2007)