

Beowulf: A Metrical Translation into Modern English by John R. Clark Hall

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*The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Jul., 1915), pp. 387-389

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3712638>

Accessed: 24/06/2014 22:59

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(for *Coupmanthorp*) with shortening of the vowel, and in the history of French *eau* § 172 it may be noted that *Beaumont*, Nthb., is locally known as [bimənt], while *Beaufront*, Nthb., was in the eighteenth century called [bivvrən], and *Beamish*, co. Durham, is from *Beaumis*. In all alike there is evidence for an alternative pronunciation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with initial [bjʊ-].

It is to be regretted that there are a considerable number of printers' errors and slips of various kinds. We may note: p. 17 (top), reference to contents of Harl. MS. 2253 is misplaced; p. 75 l. 20, *ofof* for *eofor*; § 116, *čiosib* for \**čiosib*; § 122, *drighthen* for *dryhten*; § 141, § 138 for 139; § 145, *čief* for *čeaf*; § 161, *tæccan* for *tæcean*; § 162 l. 18, [ē] for [ī]; § 163 l. 14, 156 for 165; § 214, *ige* for *ieg*; § 218 l. 3 (?) *of* for *or*; § 236 l. 3, 263 for 163; § 240 l. 2, p. 117 for 120; § 253 n. 4, § 108 for 109; § 312, *eage* for *ēage*; § 323 *urðra* for *furðra*; § 325, *dearuum* for *dearnum*; § 334 l. 12, *temma(n)* for *temmen*; § 336 (?) *gebanian* for *gebawien*; § 342, *bidden* for *biddan*, *sælon* for *sæton*; § 351, *spræcon* for *spræcon*; § 355 (?) *cwn* for *cwm*; § 358, *blæawon* for *blēowon*; § 360, *conde*, *konde* for *coude*, *koude*.

These corrections are for the most part trivial and obvious, but are given here as it is to be hoped that there will soon be sufficient demand for this excellent book to make a corrected reprint possible.

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*Beowulf: A Metrical Translation into Modern English.* By JOHN R. CLARK HALL. Cambridge: University Press. 1914. 8vo. xii + 114 pp.

In attempting to make a metrical version of the *Beowulf* in modern English, Dr Clark Hall has undertaken one of the most difficult tasks possible for a translator, and we intend no reflection on his ability and scholarship when we say that in our opinion he has not succeeded. English scholars have wrangled over the best metre and the best diction for turning into English verse the great epics of Greece and Rome, and they have not yet reached agreement. But that problem is relatively an easy one. The translator has before him a highly finished work of art by a great poet of a civilised and cultured society. As he is to translate for cultured readers of an equally civilised society possessing a roll of noble poets, he may legitimately use the language and technique shaped and perfected through the centuries by these poets, who themselves have been influenced more or less by the Greeks and Romans. The translator, if he ignores English poetic tradition and adopts a phraseology and technique of his own, will produce a version which will not only fail to please his readers but will also fail to give them a correct notion of the original poem. In the case of the *Beowulf*, not to speak of other Old English poems, the conditions of the problem are different. Between the Old Germanic prosody and that of English

verse of the last six hundred years there is a great gulf, and there is an equally great difference in vocabulary and phraseology. Further, whereas quite accurate and even pleasing English hexameters of the Greek and Roman pattern can be and have been made, no imitations in Modern English of the alliterative metre of Old English, however accurate, can be honestly said to please the ear of an English reader, whether he be acquainted or not with the Old English metrical system. The word-stress of the older language differs greatly from our own; quantity of vowels no longer plays a vital part in our verse, and above all the rhythmical groups of the two stages of the language are entirely different. But after all, the greatest difficulty for the translator does not lie in the metre. He can substitute for the alliterative verse a familiar modern scheme, say the four-beat (octosyllabic) or five-beat (decasyllabic) verse, habitually used by our modern poets for narrative and epic poems. What constitutes the greatest obstacle for the translator into English verse of an Old English poem is the peculiar character of the vocabulary and phraseology of the latter. The Old English poet had a stock of ready-made compounds or *clichés* and of 'kennings,' or equivalents, which he was obliged to use if he wished to interest and please his readers, or rather hearers. It is precisely these stock words and phrases that the translator finds so unmanageable. If he translates them literally every time, the result is clumsy and wearisome. If he tries to render them by the language of modern poetry, he conveys to the reader a false impression of the original. To the Anglo-Saxon hearer or reader the *Beowulf* was a splendid poetic achievement, faithfully observing the traditional rules of the poet's craft and its traditional phraseology. It was good to hear, stirring, full of melody, of harmonies, of familiar associations of ideas and words; it was, in a word, great poetry. Now Dr Clark Hall's version is not poetry at all; it is not verse; it has hardly even rhythm; and the same criticism applies to all the other so-called metrical versions of the *Beowulf* in Modern English. Dr Hall mentions in his preface the following as his chief guiding principles of translation:

- (1) To try to get as close as possible to the rhythm of the original.
- (2) To make his rendering acceptable to persons unfamiliar with the structure of Old English verse.
- (3) To give four well-marked stresses in each line.
- (4) To be as literal as possible.

An examination of any page in the book, indeed of any consecutive ten lines, will show that only one, the last, of these intentions is properly carried into effect. We take at random lines 739 ff.

The terrible fiend had no mind to delay  
 but quickly he seized, as first victim of all,  
 a sleeping campaigner and ate him, unwarned,—  
 bit his bone-binding thews, drank the blood up in streams,  
 swallowed bite after bite. He had eaten him up—  
 the dead man—in a trice, yea, his feet and his hands.

And then, stepping forth,      to close quarters he came  
 and seized with his hands      the hero at rest—  
 the valiant in heart—      he reached out against  
 the foe with his claw,      who grasped him at once  
 and with purpose of mind      threw his weight on his arm.

As we read this passage we fail at first to perceive any rhythm, but after a time we begin to notice a peculiar ‘bumpy’ effect, and finally we gain the impression of an irregular ‘anapaestic’ rhythm. The space left in the middle of each line obscures the perception of this rhythm, and we are confronted by a monotonous, exasperating series of jolts. Anything more unlike the original Old English metre can hardly be conceived. The uninstructed reader will not, we think, find this sort of thing acceptable; the instructed reader will shudder. Instead of four well-marked stressed syllables in a line we repeatedly come across five and even six; for example in

but quickly he seized,      as first victim of ál  
 swallowed bite after bite.      He had eaten him úp,

and actually seven in

bít his bóne-binding théws,      dránk his bloód úp in streáms.

We are driven to the conclusion that Dr Hall, when reading his translation, arbitrarily suppresses the stress on words that are normally full-stressed, in order to attain his desired object, viz. four strongly-stressed syllables in each line. In this way he adds outrage on his own language to misrepresentation of the old poet’s technique. The translation is literal; it is likewise bald. Dr Hall would have done well not to try to improve on his excellent prose version of the poem.

We are convinced that the task of producing a metrical version of the *Beowulf* is within the powers of any cultured person with a turn for writing simple, unsophisticated verse, provided that he realises exactly the nature of that task. In the first place let him understand that the vocabulary of modern poetry, with its myriad associations and allusiveness, is a great snare to the translator. In the second place, he must beware of the archaisms of language which many think most suitable for the translating of Old English poetry. In the third place, let him give up the attempt to reproduce the old metre; let him in its stead use rhyming couplets, whether of short or long lines. Blank verse is out of the question. Lastly, let him bear in mind that the author of the *Beowulf* is not self-conscious like the average modern English poet, is severely practical, economical of speech, straight, simple, bound hand and foot by tradition, yet unconscious of his bonds.

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