205 Years of *Beowulf* Translations and Adaptations (1805-2010):

A Bibliography

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Introduction

The poem now generally called *Beowulf* (it has no title in the manuscript) is rightly regarded as the masterpiece of Old English poetry. This recognition came relatively late, however. Although an interest in Old English literature arose in the 16th century in the wake of the Reformation and Old English texts were printed from the 1560s onwards, *Beowulf* was first mentioned in print in Humfrey Wanley's famous catalogue of 1705 (see 19.3.(1) below), and yet another hundred years passed until it was first discussed in a book on the Anglo-Saxons (Turner 1805, see 2.2.(1) below); the first printed edition appeared even later (Thorkelin 1815, see 19.1.(1) below). But in the course of the 19th century, its reputation became firmly established, and now it is certainly the most widely discussed Old English text. *Beowulf* is not only important for everybody interested in the beginnings of English literature in general and in Old English literature in particular, but also for all those interested in early Germanic legends, in epic and heroic poetry, in oral-formulaic traditions, in alliterative poetry, in the connections between literature and archaeology, in the influence of Christianity on native poetry, etc.

For at least two reasons, however, *Beowulf* is difficult to read and to understand even for native English speakers, let alone speakers of English as a foreign language: English in general has changed a lot since the tenth century;[1] moreover, *Beowulf* is composed in a poetic diction which probably was something special and differed from ordinary language even in its own time. Therefore most modern readers have to rely on translations, and even for specialists in Old English translations are a useful tool.

Accordingly, the tradition of *Beowulf* translations is as old as the serious study of the poem itself. The first printed edition of the poem, published under the title *De Danorum rebus gestis seculi III & IV* by the Icelander Thorkelin in 1815, was accompanied by a facing translation into Latin (see 19.1.(1) below). Even before that, selected passages had been published for the first time in an English translation by Sharon Turner in 1805 (see 2.2.(1) below). The first complete translation into a vernacular, more precisely into Danish, was published in 1820 by Grundtvig (see 8.1.(1) below), the first complete translation into English by Kemble in 1837 (see 2.1.(1) below), the first complete translation into German in 1840 by Ettmüller (see 13.1.(1) below). Scandinavian scholars (especially Thorkelin and Grundtvig) pioneered *Beowulf* studies because apparently they hoped to find information about early Scandinavian history in *Beowulf* – one of the remarkable (and often discussed) features of *Beowulf* is that, although it is an Old English poem, the action takes place almost exlusively in Scand-

1 The only existing manuscript, London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. XV, was written around 1000 AD, but most scholars assume that this manuscript is just a copy of an earlier version. When the poem was originally composed is, however, still debated; suggestions range from ca. 700 to ca. 1000, which makes for a time-span of ca. 300 years.

inavia (Denmark and what is now Southern Sweden, still called Götaland); England is not mentioned at all. The German scholars apparently regarded it as a piece of their Germanic heritage.[2]

Since the time of Thorkelin, there has been a continuous and ever-increasing flow of translations and bilingual editions of *Beowulf*. The task of translating or recreating this Old English epic poem has attracted not only scholars, but also artists and poets: In the late 19th century, the versatile Pre-Raphaelite William Morris (1834-1896), who also worked as a painter, designer etc., published a translation together with Alfred J. Wyatt (see 2.1.(11) below), which is strongly archaizing and hardly palatable today. Nevertheless it was still partly reprinted in 2009 by the British Library, see below 2.1.(11). Around the middle of the 20th century (in 1952) the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan published his version (see 2.1.(34) below). The outstanding recent example is the rendering by Nobel Price winner Seamus Heaney, first published in 1999, which has also created a lot of scholarly interest (see 2.1.(67)).[3] But other recent versions, such as the one by Roy Liuzza (2000) (see 2.1.(68) below) should also be noted as achievements in the field of *Beowulf* translations. J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), scholar and author (*Lord of the Rings*), translated the first 600 lines of *Beowulf* into verse and the whole poem into prose. This does not seem to have been published yet. There are now ca. 80 complete English translations (see 2.1 below).

Among the non-English speaking poets and literary authors who published partial translations or paraphrases of *Beowulf* were Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862; in German) and Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986; in Spanish); see 13.2.(3) and 26.3.(2) below.

A critical study of the translations of *Beowulf*, especially the more recent ones, is, however, still a desideratum of *Beowulf* scholarship. One distinction is, for example, between fairly literal versions that simply want to help the reader to understand the original Old English text, and versions that claim to be poetic re-creations in their own right – Heaney's translation definitely belongs to the latter category, although Heaney still captures the meaning and the spirit of the original.

We cannot offer such a study here,[4] but as a first step towards this aim, we offer an updated bibliography. More than a hundred years ago, the first large-scale bibliography of *Beowulf* translations was published by Tinker 1903 (see 1.2.(1) below). It was followed by a few other surveys and critical studies, see the lists given under 1 below. However, many of them were published quite some time ago. Moreover, Stiegler 1964 (see 1.4.(7) below) and Springer 1983 (see 1.4.(15) below), both privately printed and written in German, seem to have gone largely unnoticed among English-speaking scholars, and Osborn 1997 (see 1.2.(4) below) is selective. More recently, internet

2 Cf. Wilhelm Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819 ff.), which is in fact a historical grammar of the Germanic languages, and see the titles of some of the German translations listed under 13. below, where *deutsch* is used in the sense of 'Germanic'.

3 Some of the poets were (or are) also scholars: Seamus Heaney was professor of English literature, and the American poet Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) was professor of modern languages, both at Harvard; on Longfellow see 2.2.(7) below.

4 But see now the book by Magennis, 31.2 Ad 1.4.(31) below.