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Imitative Translations of *Beowulf*: Tolkien, Lehmann, and McCully

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The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* exists in numerous translations into prose and verse of various forms and styles. While some translators use accentual metre and alliteration to evoke the form of the original, few attempt to reproduce its metre and structure exactly. Focussing on lines 210–28, this essay examines three metrically imitative translations of *Beowulf* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Ruth Lehmann, and Chris McCully, alongside Tolkien's later prose translation. In juxtaposing Old and modern English, these imitative translations provide the ideal site to test Paul Fussell's claim that the Old English alliterative verse form is no longer practicable. Close reading a select passage from these translations against the Old English text highlights their correspondence to and divergence from the original. It also reveals key differences in the poetic style and linguistic characteristics of Old and modern English. Through comparative analysis, this study demonstrates how efforts to replicate Old English metre may undermine other stylistic features and poetic effects, ultimately distorting the original. In contrast, Tolkien's prose translation suggests that prose, while less bound to formal imitation, may retain a double fidelity to both the sound and meaning of the original.

Keywords: Old English poetry; Old English metre; translation; *Beowulf*; Tolkien

1. Introduction

Old English ceased to be a living language almost a thousand years ago. Consequently, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* lives now chiefly through the numerous prose and verse translations made over the last two centuries (for a comprehensive bibliography of *Beowulf*, see Magennis 2015, 221–28). Prose translations make the content of *Beowulf* immediately accessible, albeit in proxy form, and are usually intended as an aid to studying the poem in the original language. Verse translations, meanwhile, often stand independent of the original, conveying the content of the poem in the form of another poem. The latter is often considered more challenging. Regarding his own translation of *Beowulf*, Michael Alexander said that translating the alliterative poem into an approximately alliterative verse form was "like knitting a crossword" (1974, 73). Similarly, J. R.

R. Tolkien described the structure of Old English alliterative verse as "more like masonry than music" (2006a, 30). Other translators have utilised a range of alternative verse forms, from blank verse to free verse. While some translators have used accentual metre and alliteration to evoke the form of the original, few have attempted to reproduce its metre and structure exactly. Certain scholars have doubted that such a feat is even feasible. Paul Fussell, for example, argues that "although Old English verse can be recalled and imitated . . . nothing really like it can be recovered because *the language has changed*." We live in "an altered prosodic world in which the meters of the past can perhaps be understood but never again practiced" (1974, 197). By favouring formal equivalence over imitation even at the risk of anachronism, the majority of *Beowulf* translators appear to have come to a similar conclusion.[1]

My essay will focus on three notable exceptions to this trend that have been little discussed and never analytically compared. In his essay "On Translating *Beowulf*," Tolkien (2006b) provides an illustrative translation of a short extract of the poem (lines 210–28) in technically precise alliterative verse.[2] In 1988, Ruth Lehmann produced the first full-length metrically imitative translation of *Beowulf*.[3] Chris McCully's (2018) translation of *Beowulf* has professedly gone furthest in conforming to the metre of the original poem. My essay will examine Tolkien's illustrative translation alongside the Old English and then analyse the same passage in Lehmann's and McCully's translations followed finally by Tolkien's prose translation (2014). These imitative translations provide the ideal site to test Fussell's claim that the Old English alliterative verse form is impracticable in modern English. Close reading a select passage from these translations alongside the Old English not only weighs their correspondence to and divergence from the original. It also illustrates differences between the poetic style and linguistic characteristics of Old and modern English. Alexander has warned that, especially in academia, "translations are often used as a matter of practical convenience, unreflectively" (1974, 70). Reflective comparative analysis, however, grants access to an unfamiliar text, appreciation of its distinctive art and style, and greater awareness of the dissimilar affinity between Old and modern English.

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[1] Dennis Wise (2024) argues that a "Modern Alliterative Revival" since the 1930s accounts for numerous original poems composed in alliterative verse of varying degrees of technical fidelity. Nonetheless, the form is rarely used to translate Old English poetry, which is the focus of my essay.

[2] Other verses from Tolkien's metrical translation of *Beowulf* have recently been published, but analysis of them is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present essay. See Tolkien (2024, 620–36).

[3] While Lehmann is the only *Beowulf* translator to describe her approach as *imitative*, I adopt the term throughout to designate emulation of a source text through extreme technical fidelity.

2. Alliterative Verse from Old to Modern English

Before analysing the translations of Tolkien, Lehmann, and McCully, it may be helpful to outline the integral features of the Old English alliterative verse form. A line of alliterative verse consists of two half lines—an on-verse and off-verse—each rhythmically defined by two lifts and two dips. This balanced distribution of strongly stressed and weakly stressed rhythmical components may be illustrated by the following diagram:

(verse line)
strong *weak*
(on-verse) (off-verse)
strong *weak* *strong* *weak*
(1st lift) (2nd lift) (1st lift) (2nd lift)

Each pair of half-lines are linked by alliteration, the distribution of which corresponds with rhythmical structure by falling usually on the most strongly stressed parts of the line. Jun Terasawa explains that because "the second lift of the off-verse . . . is the weakest metrical constituent, it should not alliterate." Meanwhile, "the first lifts of both half-lines, which are the strong metrical constituents in their respective half-lines, always take part in alliteration" (2022, 21). Furthermore, the stress pattern of each half-line conforms to one of five metrical types, consisting of lifts (/), dips (x), and half-lifts (\): A (/x/x, falling), B (x/x/, rising), C (x//x, clashing), D1 (//\x, falling by stages), D2 (//x\, broken fall), and E (/\x/, fall and rise) (Mitchell and Robinson 2012, 160).[4] As in modern English, the greatest degree of stress will usually fall on words of greatest semantic importance, which will also usually carry alliteration. All the above may be observed in the following line from *Beowulf*:

Oft Scyld Scēfing sceaþena þrēatum[.] (Fulk 2008, 3, l. 4)[5]

In this line, alliteration falls on the two adjacent lifts of a type C on-verse and the first lift of a type A off-verse. The first dip of the off-verse here is said to be "expanded" because it contains two lightly stressed syllables (*-ena*) instead of one. The two lifts and two dips of a half-line constitute its four necessary metrical positions. Lifts always consist of only one syllable, except in the case of resolution

[4] Formulated in 1893 by Eduard Sievers, this standard metrical system for Old Germanic alliterative verse is not without expansion, emendation, and criticism. For an overview of which, see Bjork and Niles (1998, 55–83).
[5] All quotations from *Beowulf* are from this edition and are cited by line number in the body of the essay.

(see fn. 17), but dips may contain several, though only one metrical position may be expanded in any half-line. Altogether, metre and alliteration work together with syntax within a highly variable yet carefully maintained system.

Most translations of *Beowulf* replicate this metrical-alliterative system only in part. As Dennis Wise puts it, "[t]he alliterative meter is no longer an inherited tradition; it is a poet's smorgasbord of options" (2024, 12). Stephen Mitchell's 2017 translation, for example, maintains "four beats" per line, employing alliteration as a "structural element" while keeping lines containing "three alliterating letters . . . to a minimum" (Mitchell 2017, xxv). This last condition is interesting because lines containing alliteration on both lifts of the on-verse and the first lift of the off-verse (known as *double alliteration*) are common throughout *Beowulf*. Take for example the opening lines of the poem:

> Oft Scyld Scēfing sceaþena þrēatum,
> monegum mæġþum, meodosetla oftēah,
> eġsode eorl[as], syððan ærest wearð
> fēasceaft funden. Hē þæs frōfre ġebād:
> wēox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þāh[.] (lines 4–8)

These five successive lines of double alliteration are changed significantly in Mitchell's translation:

> Often Scyld Scefing shattered the ranks
> of hostile tribes and filled them with terror.
> He began as a foundling but flourished later
> and grew to glory beneath the sky[.] (2017, 3, lines 4–7)

Here double alliteration occurs only in line 4, albeit on the past tense verb "shattered," translating *oftēah* "deprived," instead of the plural genitive *sceaþena* "of enemies." The alliterative pattern of line 5 would be prohibited in conservative alliterative verse because the second lift of the off-verse should not carry alliteration. Line 6 would be prohibited because single alliteration falling on the second lift occurs only in type A3 half-lines, a subtype of A which has the metrical pattern xx/x (for more detail, see Stanley 1992). As Terasawa explains, A3 half-lines "contain only a single lift with the first lift suppressed" (2022, 37), which is inconceivable in Mitchell's consistently four-beat lines. Line 7 would be prohibited because alliteration occurs in the on-verse while the first lift of the off-verse lacks alliteration. This position, known as the *head-stave*, is the only place where alliteration *must* occur as it determines the alliteration for the rest of the line. Thus, only one of Mitchell's four lines conforms to conventional alliterative patterning.

The type of alliteration used in *Beowulf* is relatively conservative. As Terasawa notes, in "consonantal alliteration, repetition of a single consonant usually suffices" (2022, 13). Not only is Mitchell's alliterative patterning very variable, but the quality of his alliteration is weakened by the combination of differing consonant clusters: the /tr/ of *tribes* and the /t/ of *terror*, the /f/ of *foundling* and the /fl/ of *flourished*, and the /gr/ of *grew* with the /gl/ of *glory*. Also, Mitchell undermines one of the most essential stylistic techniques of alliterative verse: patterned semantic variation, also known as *apposition*. Arthur Brodeur defines this technique as "a double or multiple statement of the same concept or idea in multiple words, with a more or less perceptible shift in stress" (1959, 129). So, while Mitchell translates *sceaþena þrēatum* as "of hostile tribes," he omits the varied half-line *monegum mǣġþum* "from many peoples." He also replaces the further variation *eorl*[*as*] "warriors" with the pronoun *they*. Consequently, his translation compresses five lines into four but in the process loses the stylistic element of patterned variation, gaining in flexibility what it loses in stylistic integrity. By making the norm of double alliteration in the original an exception in his translation, Mitchell's translation strategy fails to capture the style of the original. However, Mitchell's technically lax translation arguably makes the content of the poem more accessible to a general readership lacking specialist knowledge. Mitchell has also translated *The Iliad* (2011), *The Odyssey* (2013), and *Gilgamesh* (2004), so his translation of *Beowulf* is likely intended to be popular rather than scholarly.

Nevertheless, even the translation of as eminent an Anglo-Saxonist as Roy Liuzza (2013) utilises the technical features of *Beowulf* only selectively. In his scholarly edition of the poem, which also contains historical, religious, and literary analogues, Liuzza describes his translation as "analogous to, not imitative of, the character of the original." Specifically, each line of his translation contains "four stresses, a medial pause, and alliteration," features which are, however, not "marked as they are in the original" (2013, 42). Few recent translators of *Beowulf* are better qualified to understand the function of the form of the original poem, yet Liuzza does not attempt to replicate it. He even translates occasionally into blank verse as "[a]t moments of great formality in the poem the lines resolve into decasyllables" during "passages of quotation or verse-within-the-verse" (2013, 42). This notably occurs in the so-called "Lay of the Last Survivor" (lines 2247–66), which in Liuzza's translation concludes:

> Harp-joy have I none,
> no happy song; nor does the well-schooled hawk
> soar high throughout the hall, nor the swift horse
> stamp in the courtyards. Savage butchery
> has sent forth many of the race of men! (2013, 191, lines 2262–66)

Liuzza's modulated verse style here reflects the uniqueness of a passage uttered neither by the omniscient narrator nor by any character involved with the main action of the poem. It is, rather, a dead voice out of the dark past, carrying with it half-remembered rhythms. Ultimately, Liuzza's facing-page translation invites a conversation between the Old English poem and his modern translation. His detailed introduction and the paratextual material, meanwhile, help the modern reader approach this unfamiliar Old English poem. Altogether, his edition is as useful for a student as it is intriguing for a general reader.

3. Making it New-Old

Overall, translators of *Beowulf* consider and evaluate Old and modern English verse form, the difficulties inherent in technical fidelity, and the compromises each translation must inevitably make. It is perhaps surprising that the question of how best to convey the verse form of *Beowulf* in translation should be so fraught. After all, certain notable twentieth-century poets have skilfully utilised elements of alliterative verse—with greater or lesser strictness—for original composition. In *Strange Likeness* (2006), Chris Jones surveys the influence of Old English on twentieth-century poetry, focusing on the work of Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden, Edwin Morgan, and Seamus Heaney. In his follow-up study *Fossil Poetry* (2018), Jones highlights Pound's experimental translation of the Old English poem *The Seafarer* (2010) as a catalyst for "twentieth-century poetic Anglo-Saxonism." Modern translators and poets increasingly "embrace[d] the formal qualities that distinguish Old English from later tradition," thereby "reintegrating them" into modern poetry or "letting their alterity disturb the unity of Englishness" (2018, 95). The form of Pound's *Seafarer* does not strictly adhere to the rules of alliterative verse and its language frequently strays from words of Anglo-Saxon origin. Nonetheless, its consistently falling rhythm conveys the feel of Old English as an inflected language. Also, as Stephen Adams argues, its "artificial speech . . . creates a double awareness of the poem in time, as it was and as it appears now" (1976, 130). As a Modernist, and tempering the Futurist rejection of the past (see Rainey 2005, 1–38), Pound used translation to remould the oldest English poetry into a form that would influence modern poetry and make it new.

Tolkien's poetry stands in sharp contrast to that of Pound and may even seem, when seen alongside Modernist literary developments, out of key with its time. Jones, in fact, excludes Tolkien from *Strange Likeness* because "his influence on other writers is negligible and having to justify his inclusion alongside more 'serious' poets would unbalance the book" (2006, 13). Instead, he directs readers to Phelpstead's (2004) essay on the Inklings. Nonetheless, Tolkien utilised a metrically imitative form of alliterative verse for many original poems on a range

of largely legendary subjects, often expanding other literary sources.[6] His "Lay of the Children of Húrin" (2019), for example, pertains to the world of Middle Earth. The paired poems "The New Lay of Gudrún" (2010a) and "The New Lay of the Völsungs" (2010b) are derived from the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*.[7] Similarly inspired by Old Germanic legend is the alliterative poem "King Sheave" (1987) on the founder of the Scylding dynasty, whose arrival, rule, and funeral in Denmark is the subject of *Beowulf*'s "Prologue" (lines 1–52). In "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" (2001), meanwhile, two men who have set out to recover the body of Beorhtnoth from Maldon debate the ethics of the lost battle.[8] Tolkien's unfinished poem *The Fall of Arthur*, for which there are "120 pages of drafting" (Tolkien 2015, 171), was inspired in part by the fifteenth-century alliterative *Morte Arthure*.[9] Tolkien also skillfully conveyed the alliterative verse form of the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in his tastefully archaising translation (2006c).[10] Yet his translation of *Beowulf*—which he revised, provided a commentary for, yet never finalised for publication—is into prose.

Justification for Tolkien's choice of translation strategy here can be found in his essay "On Translating *Beowulf*" (2006b), which originally prefaced a revised edition of Clark Hall's prose translation of the poem.[11] Tolkien states that the "purpose of a prose translation is to provide an aid to study[ing]" *Beowulf* in Old English that nonetheless should not supplant the original text (2006b, 49). He argues that a translation is "valuable, not so much for the version it produces, as for the understanding of the original it awakes" (53). Tolkien's pedagogical argument here seems more applicable to his translation of *Beowulf* than to that of *Gawain*, his versions of these poems differing markedly in form and style. The "main object" of Tolkien's *Gawain* translation was to "preserve the metres" and "present the language and style . . . as they were for the people to whom they were addressed" (2015, 2).[12] His purpose in translating *Beowulf* was, according to Christopher Tolkien, "to make a translation as close as he could to the exact

[6] Shippey (2013) offers a detailed overview of Tolkien's alliterative verse.
[7] For an edition of which, see Larrington (2019).
[8] For an edition of the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon", see Griffith (2024).
[9] For an edition of which, see Hamel (1984). For a detailed metrical analysis of *The Fall of Arthur* and the two "Lays" mentioned above, see Goering (2015).
[10] Tolkien's friend and colleague C. S. Lewis also utilised alliterative verse for original composition, for which see Cossio (2024) and Wise (2023a, 2023b). In an influential essay on alliterative verse published in 1935, Lewis finds it "remarkable that few have yet suggested a return to our own ancient system, the alliterative line" (2013, 15).
[11] Wise argues convincingly that this prefatory essay was originally intended to introduce Tolkien's own prose translation of *Beowulf*, "complete since April 1926" yet never published (2023c, 310).
[12] Relatedly, Tolkien never agreed with certain scholars that the metrical form of *Pearl*, which is in the same manuscript as *Gawain*, is "impossible to render into modern English" (1995, 317). He proved this by composing a short poem ("The Nameless Land") in its form. See Tolkien (2024, 537).

meaning in detail of the Old English poem." Utilising prose allowed him to get "far closer than could ever be attained by translation into 'alliterative verse'" (Tolkien 2014, 8). There are many fidelities to the art of translation—to sound or sense, to lexis or syntax, to form or content—which the translator promotes or demotes as fits their translation. Tolkien alters the form of his translations as his priorities as a translator change.

4. Tolkien's Alliterative Verse

"On Translating *Beowulf*" (Tolkien 2006b) goes on to explore many of the issues involved in translating Old English poetry more generally, focusing on matters of word-choice, style, and metre. To explore these difficulties and demonstrate how Old English metre might be used in modern English translation, Tolkien provides a "free version" of *Beowulf* lines 210–28 in technically precise alliterative verse (2006b, 63). This imitative translation demonstrates how Old English metre might be replicated in modern English, yet it differs in significant ways from the original. This passage occurs after the depredations of Grendel have reached the ears of Beowulf, who departs from Geatland and, with an entourage of fifteen men, sails toward Denmark. Yet it covers a transitional period before Beowulf's arrival at Heorot, where his vow to kill the monster commences the narrative proper. In the commentary to his prose translation of *Beowulf*, Tolkien describes this section simply as "[a] good passage of description" (2014, 192). Its lack of speech and action yet abundance of descriptive detail means this passage adequately illustrates how Old English poetic techniques are used in the original and in translation. Here is the original Old English:

Fyrst forð ġewāt. Flota wæs on ȳðum,
bāt under beorge. Beornas ġearwe
on stefn stigon. Streamas wundon,
sund wið sande. Secgas bæron
on bearm nacan beorhte frætwe,
gūðsearo ġeatolic̀; guman ūt scufon,
weras on wilsīð, wudu bundenne.
Ġewāt þa ofer wæġholm winde ġefȳsed
flota fāmīheals fugle ġelīcost,
oð þæt ymb āntīd ōþres dōgo̧res
wundenstefna gewaden hæfde,
þæt ðā līðende land ġesāwon,
brimclifu blican, beorgas stēape,
sīde sænæssas; þā wæs sund liden,
eoletes æt ende. Þanon up hraðe

Wedera lēode on wang stigon,
sæwudu sældon, syrċan hrysedon,
guðġewædo; Gode þancedon
þæs þe him ȳþlāde ēaðe wurdon.

As the most conspicuous Old English poetic technique and the one most frequently incorporated by translators, alliteration provides a good starting point for analysis. Of the eighteen lines of the Old English passage, twelve contain double alliteration. In 213, the non-alliterating word *bæron* carries (as it were) a new pattern of /b/ alliteration into the following line. Meanwhile, double alliteration on /w/ is present across two consecutive lines (216–17), the second of which is the only one beginning with a verb (*Ġewāt*). Of lines containing single alliteration, 220a and 225a have compounds (*wundenstefna*, *guðġewædo*), 221a has a gerund (*līðende*), and 219a is a type A3 half-line. That is, its cluster of function words (*oð þæt ymb*) suppress the first lift, thereby necessitating alliteration on the second (or only) lift (*āntīd*). In such a metrically light line, which provides only temporal information rather than dramatic action or poetic description, alliteration (on two vowels) is less pronounced. This passage demonstrates just how common and consistent double-alliteration is in *Beowulf*, occurring in every line across 210–18 except for 214a. Disruption to this consistency in the middle of the passage coincides with a pivot in the course of the immediate narrative. The Geats, having loaded their vessel and departed, spot the destination they then head toward. Alliteration also functions alongside other aural features such as the consonantal rhyme *sund wið sande*, which evokes the intermingling of the sand and seawater. Alliteration, then, is a pervasive poetic technique present in some way in every line of *Beowulf*. Its structural integrity is demonstrated by the avoidance in this metrically conservative passage of more unusual crossed (a|b||a|b) or transverse (a|b||b|a) patterns of alliteration. Here is Tolkien's translation:

Time passed away. On the tide floated
under bank their boat. In her bows mounted
brave men blithely. Breakers turning
spurned the shingle. Splendid armour
they bore aboard, in her bosom piling
well-forged weapons, then away thrust her
to voyage gladly valiant-timbered.
She went then over wave-tops, wind pursued her,
fleet, foam-throated, like a flying bird;
and her curving prow on its course waded,
till in due season on the day after
those seafarers saw before them
shore-cliffs shimmering and sheer mountains,

wide capes by the waves: to water's end
the ship had journeyed. Then ashore swiftly
they leaped to land, lords of Gothland, 225
bound fast their boat. Their byrnies rattled,
grim gear of war. God thanked they then
that their sea-passage safe had proven. (2006b, 63)[13]

While most translators incorporate alliteration ornamentally and at will, Tolkien largely conforms to the patterns permissible in conservative Old English alliterative verse. Maintaining consistent alliterative patterning within metrically acceptable half-lines necessitates some syntactical readjustment, however. In 211b–12a, for example, the more natural word order "Brave men mounted / blithely in her bows," with its post-modifying adverb and clause-final indirect object, is avoided. This is because, while the alliterative pattern would be the same, 212a would then contain only one long dip between lifts, which is prohibited in Sieversian metrics.[14] As it stands, the word order of the line is less standard in that both indirect object and main verb precede the subject. Stylistically, this allows the verb *mounted* to occur at the end of the line. Such a placement is common in Old English verse style and eleven of the eighteen lines in this passage end with a verb. Ironically, however, the original 212a itself is not one of them.

Similarly unusual is the position of the adverb *away* in 215b, which precedes the verb *thrust*. This rearrangement provides /w/ alliteration on the head-stave agreeing with *well-forged weapons* and imitates the word-order of the original, in which the (non-alliterating) adverb *ūt* precedes the verb *scufon*. The temporal details provided in line 219 of the original are shifted to line 220 in Tolkien's translation. The alliterative pattern of his line appears dysfunctional, however, because in modern prosody the noun and not the adjective in the phrase *due season* would receive greater, and therefore metrically primary, stress. Similar instances of this occur at 223a with the phrase *wide capes* and 217a with the compound *foam-throated*. However, the modern prosodic instinct for right-headedness is offset by the "Left Dominance" rule of alliteration. As Terasawa explains, in an "on-verse contain[ing] two nominals . . . alliteration falls on both words or on the word at the left, but not on the word at the right alone" (2022, 22). As can be seen, Tolkien extends this rule to include also adjective-noun

[13] Tolkien's translation appears with diacritical marking on primary and secondary stressed syllables, vertical bars between half-lines as well as metrical positions within half-lines, and a list of metrical types corresponding to each half-line, all of which I have silently removed. I have retained his line-numbering.

[14] Alan Bliss, however, permits paired medial dips by further dividing half-lines into "breath-groups" (1962, 14–15). For work that builds fruitfully on Bliss's influential expansion of Sievers' metrical system, see Pascual (2013, 2014, 2017, 2019).

structures to help him conform to the conventional alliterative patterning. The consistency of the alliterative pattern in Tolkien's translation determines where the metrically significant alliterations fall, with Old English metrical rules sometimes overriding the instincts of modern prosody. Altogether, then, Tolkien maintains conventional alliterative patterning and metrical types as well as original word order as consistently as possible in his translation. In doing so, he displays a deep understanding of Old English metre and impressive skill in incorporating it into his modern version.

Nonetheless, Tolkien's skillful observance of Old English metre and alliterative patterning comes at the expense of other poetic and stylistic effects, especially repetition and variation. Lines 210–28 relate the journey by sea of a group of retainers to a new country. Appropriately, variation occurs on lexical items relating to the boat, men, sea, landscape, treasure, motion, and passing of time. Tolkien only partially replicates the cumulative effect of this extent of variation. It is worth focusing on the word *boat*, which has as many as eight variations across lines 210–26: *Flota*, *bāt*, *stefn*, *bearm nacan*, *wudu*, *flota fāmīheals*, *wundenstefna*, *sǣwudu*. Tolkien reduces the apposition across 210b–11a of *Flota* and *bāt* to the single word *boat* (211b). Similarly, the adverb *aboard* and the nautical pronoun *her* (214) obviate the need to translate either *nacan* (214a) or *wudu* (216b). The words *bows* (211b) and *prow* (219a) replace the varied nouns *stefn* (212a) and *wundenstefna* (220a). While these replacements are of a nautical lexical field, they are not used synecdochically and so lack the effect of varied synonyms. Relatedly, the unusual past-participle+noun form of the synecdochic compound *wundenstefna* "wound-prow" (220a) is difficult to translate literally. Tolkien argues that, when dealing with Old English compound words, a translator will likely "hesitate between simply naming the thing denoted" or "resolving the combination into a phrase" (2014, 58). Tolkien generally prefers the latter approach, and in 220a he supplies the adjectival noun phrase "her curving prow," a possessive pronoun again supplanting a varied noun.

Other effects unique to Old English poetry are lost in translation. One example is the erasure of a kenning, which is a periphrastic, metaphorical compound substituting the simple term for something, usually for poetic effect or to supply alliteration. Specifically, Tolkien replaces the nautical kenning *sǣwudu* "sea-wood" (226) with the simpler, more familiar, and already used word "boat." Tolkien's decision not to replicate the variation of the original has both stylistic consequences and structural implications for his translation. The near repetition of *on stefn stigon* "they climbed onto the prow" (212a) and *on wang stigon* [they climbed onto the land] (225b) forms an envelope pattern. That is, it formulaically frames the beginning of the journey as the men board the ship and its end as they disembark. Tolkien's translations "In her bows mounted" (211b) and "they leaped

to land" (225a) are accurate and convey the meaning well enough. They do not parallel each other in exact phrasing, however, so that the envelope pattern of the original is forsaken. Accumulatively, then, the sustained variation of the original is diffracted and diluted in Tolkien's otherwise metrically exact translation. This suggests that such a degree of technical fidelity to *Beowulf* carries the risk of undermining other less methodically observable poetic elements.

5. Lehmann's Alliterative Verse

The technically imitative strategy demonstrated in part by Tolkien's illustrative translation was exhibited in full almost fifty years later in Ruth Lehmann's *Beowulf: An Imitative Translation* (1988). Lehmann describes her translation as "more or less imitative of Germanic alliterative verse," a form she occasionally modifies to avoid "distort[ing] modern English into something awkward and unintelligible" (1988, 16). Lehmann's literary credentials are broad and varied, as she edited language texts for the US armed forces, wrote on "broken cadences" in *Beowulf*, and published poetry of her own (2000, 1975). Her translation of *Beowulf* is consequently informed by linguistic cognisance, deep understanding of Old English metre, and sensitivity to poetic rhythm. In the introduction to her translation, Lehmann makes an important observation on the morphological modification of English historically and its implications for poetic rhythm and metre: "inflectional endings have been lost or reduced so far that the most frequent rhythm of Old English—ending on an unstressed syllable—has given way to the iambic rhythm of the modern language" (1988, 16). This observation affects her approach to anacrusis, which refers to "an unstressed monosyllable or, less frequently, a disyllable, that optionally appears before the initial lift" of a half-line (Suzuki 1995, 141). Lehmann "accommodate[s] the modern tendency to use articles" by utilising "anacrusis in types A, D, and even E (where it was avoided)." As a counterbalance to this modulation, she "limit[s] anacrusis to a single syllable," the better to maintain metrically distinguishable half-lines (1988, 17). Lehmann's scholarly appreciation of Old English metre informs her scrupulously imitative translation and is well demonstrated throughout lines 210–28. Here is Lehmann's translation:

> Time traveled on, the transport on the seaway, 210
> the ship under sheer cliffs, shore swept with waves,
> with winding currents. Willingly fighters
> mounted the gangway; men carried in
> to the hollow hold handsome armor,
> well-made war-gear. Warriors started, 215
> launched the vessel on its longed-for course.
> Off across the ocean, urged by breezes,

foamy fore-stem flew like a bird,
till by the set season of the second day
the craft with curved prow had covered the distance,
and those sailing men saw land ahead,
shorecliffs shining, sheer escarpments,
wide seaheadlands; waters were traversed,
travel ended. The troop of Weders
disembarked quickly, bounded landward,
moored the wavefloater, (mailcoats resounded,
thick protectors.) They gave thanks to God
for a calm passage crossing the seapaths. (Lehmann 1988, 27)[15]

As shown above, variation in the original passage is various, with synonyms, synecdoches, compounds, and kennings all used for *boat*. Lehmann's translation reflects much of this variety. She balances the abstract *transport* with the concrete *ship* (210b–11a), translates the synecdochic *wudu* with "vessel" (216a), and expands the compound *wundenstefna* into "craft with curved prow" (210a). She translates the compound *sæwudu* (226a) with the compound "wavefloater" (226a), the second element corresponding to two previous instances of *flota*, translated "transport" (210b) and "fore-stem" (218a) respectively. Avoiding the unsatisfactory cognate *floater*, Lehmann retains the adjective *foamy* (from *fāmīheals*) and supplies the compound *fore-stem* as a synecdochic synonym for *ship*, thereby supplying variation of her own.

Contrary to Tolkien, Lehmann's apparent ease with conveying the variation of the original is at odds with certain apparent difficulties with metre. For example, stress on the verb *flew* (a word absent from the original) and the noun *bird* at 218b results in a choriambic half-line (/xx/), a structure impermissible in Sieversian metrics.[16] This problem occurs more conspicuously at 223b, where the phrase *waters were traversed* contains three unstressed syllables between two stresses, a prohibited long medial dip. 223b may be intended as an expanded D2 type (with two lifts, a dip, and a half-lift), but the naturally light stress on the verb *were* works against this. The word *traversed* can also be pronounced trochaically, which would make 223b an expanded A type half-line (/xx/x). However, this is only one possible scansion, and so metrically the half-line remains either deficient or ambiguous. The D1 type half-line at 223a has a very subtle deficiency even though the stress-pattern of *wide seaheadlands* is remarkably close to that of *sīde sǣnæssas*. The deficiency is that, as Terasawa explains, D1 half-lines when expanded—as in 223a with the unstressed *-e* in *sīde*—require double alliteration

[15] I have regularised the line-numbering.
[16] The choriamb is, however, natural to modern English and occurs frequently in accentual-syllabic verse. See especially Keppel-Jones (2001, 56–72).

because of their metrical heaviness (2022, 42). Of course, such rules are fundamentally conditioned by the nature of the Old English language, with its clear distinction between long and short vowels. It may therefore be unreasonable to expect a translator to imitate them in modern English, which makes no such comparable distinction. Nonetheless, forgoing these rules necessarily undermines the status of any translation as being truly or fully imitative.

Despite these criticisms, Lehmann's attempt to adhere to strict Sieversian metrics throughout her translation of *Beowulf*—the first to make such an attempt—is impressive in itself. However, Hugh Magennis is perhaps justified in asserting that Lehmann's imitative experiment "is interesting as a scholarly exercise but does not work as a poem" (2015, 201). In Lehmann's translation, the natural prosody of modern English strains against the *foreign* metrical system of Old English alliterative verse. The closer Lehmann tries to imitate Old English metre, the more evident it becomes that modern English sits uneasily within it. Ironically, Lehmann compromises her translation strategy by pursuing it.

6. McCully's Alliterative Verse

The author of the third translation I will examine is, like both Tolkien and Lehmann, a scholarly poet-translator. Chris McCully has "written a PhD thesis . . . on Old English verse form and metrics" and published collections of both original poetry and Old English poetry in translation (McCully 2018, 160). A lengthy and erudite afterword to his translation of *Beowulf* displays his metrical expertise yet comes across as peculiarly apologetic. The phrase *I fudged it* recurs throughout as McCully expounds features of Old English metre that his translation struggles—by his own admission often unsuccessfully—to replicate. In general, McCully adopts a "four-position half-line with very strong closural constraints," in which he "tried to find a diction that was contemporary yet still relatively formal" (McCully 2018, 169, 192). McCully's prioritisation of closure makes his imitative translation uniquely meticulous. In Old English alliterative verse, McCully explains, "half-lines are usually phrasal units: their metrical closures are also syntactic ones" (2018, 178). Barbara Strang outlines the concept of closure in more detail: "[t]he end of a half-line is always determinate in syllabic structure" and when occupied by a dip "there is the special restriction that [it] must there be monosyllabic" (2015, 326). So, in *Bēowulf maðelode* "Beowulf made a speech" (405a) the medial and final *e* of the verb are elided to prevent the half-line ending on two unstressed syllables.[17] McCully acknowledges that he does

[17] Technically, elision of the first *e* here is known as *resolution*. This metrical feature "equates a long stressed syllable with a two-syllable sequence consisting of a short stressed syllable plus an unstressed syllable" (Bredehoft 2005, 15).

not keep "absolutely faithful even to the modest set of constraints" he adopts, finding it "wasn't flexible enough . . . to create a truly metrical translation" (2018, 178). Nonetheless, I will analyse lines 210–28 of his translation to discern what his technical approach reveals regarding the disparity between Old English metrics and modern English prosody. Here is McCully's translation:

> Time passed, and held the boat's passage,
> rucking under cliff-falls. They climbed into the prow
> to watch tide-races turbid with sand-bloom,
> readied bright-polished battle-treasures
> in the ship's structure, shoved off again –
> on their mission intent, menacing, purposed
> on their enterprise in their iron-bound boat.
> Over the waves' pathways wide-waked they came:
> wind-cunning bird; a wry-necked craft.
> Soon, on the second of successive days,
> the crossing was done. At the decorated
> prow the watchman pointed out the land,
> the estranging slopes of steep sea-cliffs,
> nesses, headlands. That hurtling voyage
> was at an end. And up they stood –
> battle-troop of Weders in a body jumping
> gunwales, making fast mere's-keel. Mail-shirts
> grated, thrawn with effort. They gave thanks to God
> for safe crossing of the sundering tides. (MCully 35)

McCully's imitative translation strategy, much like that of Tolkien, prioritises metrics at the expense of other poetic features such as variation. Throughout lines 210–28 of the original, variation on *men* is almost as frequent as for *boat*, from *Beornas* (211b) to *Wedera lēode* (225a). In McCully's translation, however, this variation is erased, with synonyms for *men* replaced entirely by pronouns and subjectless verbs. The half-line *Secgas bǣron* (213b) becomes "readied" (213a), *guman ūt scufon* (215b) becomes "shoved off again" (214b), and *weras on wilsīð* (216a) becomes "purposed / on their enterprise" (215b–16a). The cumulative erasure of variation in this passage renders it generally more verbal than nominal, emphasising variety of action at the expense of the original's variety of language.

There are other more particular problems in McCully's translation, especially pertaining to prosodic and poetic rhythm. The fact that *stigon* at 212a becomes "they climbed" (211b) and *stigon* at 225b becomes "they stood" (224b) is no small change. It highlights an important morphological and syntactic difference between Old and modern English that causes McCully difficulties as a translator. Essentially, the falling rhythm of *stigon* is replaced by the rising rhythm of *they climbed/stood*. Old English has a predominantly falling rhythm because verbs

inflect for person, number, and tense with suffixes which—metrically as well as generally—are always lightly stressed. The verbal suffix *-on*, for example, marks the third person plural preterite. It occurs throughout lines 210–28, most often in agreement with nouns for *men*, as in *Secgas bǣron* "the men carried" (213b). Modern English morphology marks the past tense with the affixation of a dental suffix in weak verbs (climb, climbed) or a modified stem vowel in strong verbs (give, gave). Grammatical person is marked only in the third person present (climbs, gives). Consequently, the falling rhythm of Old English *bǣron* is substituted, when translated into modern English, by the rising rhythm of *they bore*. This is the main reason why, historically, alliterative verse was superseded by accentual-syllabic verse, as Geoffrey Russom explains: the "iambic foot . . . provided an ideal site for the native iambic phrases that proliferated as inflectional endings were replaced by function words such as articles, auxiliary verbs, and prepositions" (2017, 260). It is also the reason why the alliterative verse form, having been formulated for an older stage of English, is so difficult to write in modern English.

This discrepancy becomes more evident when the alliterative verse form is replicated in translation, wherein Old English metrics and modern English prosody are superimposed. McCully's attempt to fit a prosodic round peg into a metrical square hole forces him to formulate exceptions to his own rules. His translation strategy "allowed half-lines such as *most blessedly* (100a) [which] ends on two unstressed syllables" and has knowingly "left [such] metrically deviant half-lines in the present translation" (McCully 2018, 181–2). This means the half-line "on their enterprise" (216b) is metrically correct only if the medial vowel of *enterprise* is elided in imitation of the Old English practice of resolution. While this is plausible, such a scansion would nonetheless be nullified by the knowledge that it could equally be considered merely metrically deviant. Furthermore, making Old English metre "run at all in present-day English . . . [required] freer use of the possibilities of enjambment than would ever have been possible in Old English" (McCully 2018, 162). One such conspicuous example is "On the decorated / prow" (220b–21a). However, 220b is also metrically deviant for ending on three light syllables. Additionally, it contains only one stress on the word *décorated* (alliterating with *done* in 220a) but cannot be considered a modern A3 half-line because it occurs in the off-verse. The use of enjambment only undermines the metrical integrity of 220b and so more broadly calls McCully's imitative translation strategy into question.

While McCully adopts an impressive range of metrical criteria in the formation of his imitative translation, much of it is followed up by exceptions and so undermined. As a result, the reader can no longer be expected to recognise where a rule is kept, where it is bent, and where it is broken. This can hardly help the "reader . . . experience something of the textures and formal properties of the

original," as the back cover of his edition of *Beowulf* claims. However, it is not for want of technical skill or specialist knowledge that McCully's translation falls short of its imitative aims. Rather, it is because adopting an Old English verse form while maintaining natural modern English prosody renders the task of translation almost impossibly difficult. McCully's translation was motivated by what he saw as the "essential continuities between the English language of twelve hundred years ago and the English language of the present day" (188). Morphologically and so prosodically and so metrically, however, the end result suggests the opposite.

7. Tolkien's Prose

Having analysed these imitative translations, it may be easier to understand why Tolkien—despite his ability to utilise alliterative verse for both original composition and translation—chose to translate *Beowulf* into prose. As Octavio Paz argues, "poetic translation . . . is a procedure analogous to poetic creation, but it unfolds in the opposite direction." Specifically, a translator's "intended destination is a poem analogous although not identical to the original poem" (2017, 158). While Tolkien's prose translation of *Beowulf* obviously bears little formal resemblance to the original poem, it is very close to it in meaning. Tolkien's essentially pedagogical approach to translating *Beowulf* led him to prioritise the matter over the metre in this respect. Also, while his prose translation makes no attempt to conform to the metrical system of alliterative verse, it does evoke it through certain rhythmical qualities of its own. Tolkien argued that Old English poetry is essentially composed from "the half-dozen commonest and most compact phrase-patterns of the ordinary language that have two elements or stresses" (2014, 8). Christopher Tolkien detects a certain self-consciousness to the rhythm and diction of Tolkien's prose translation evocative of these phrase-patterns, though suggests it "by no means invite[s] analysis" (2014, 10). I disagree. With the exception of Britton Brook's perfunctory essay on Tolkien's balance of *literalism* and *literariness* in his translation (2014), no scholar has examined Tolkien's prose translation on a technical level. I will briefly analyse his rendition of the sea-crossing passage:

> Time passed on. Afloat upon the waves was the boat beneath the cliffs. Eagerly the warriors mounted the prow, and the streaming seas swirled upon the sand. Men-at-arms bore to the bosom of the ship their bright harness, their cunning gear of war; they then, men on a glad voyage, thrust her forth with her well-joined timbers. Over the waves of the deep she went sped by the wind, sailing with foam at throat most like unto a bird, until in due hour upon the second day her curving beak had made such way that those sailors saw the land, the cliffs beside the ocean gleaming, and sheer headlands and capes thrust far to sea. Then for that sailing ship the

> journey was at an end. Thence the men of the Windloving folk climbed swiftly up upon the beach, and made fast the sea-borne timbers of their ship; their mail-shirts they shook, their raiment of war. They gave thanks to God that the passage of the waves had been made easy for them. (2014, 19)

Tolkien's prose translation has fundamentally different formal conditions from both his verse translation and the original poem, as is evident from the opening of this passage. The requirement in Old English alliterative verse that a half-line comprise four metrical positions necessitates a minimum of four syllables per half-line in imitative translation (see Pascual 2013, 2016).[18] Freed from this condition, Tolkien's prose passage opens forcefully with the triple beat of three monosyllabic words: *Time passed on*. The monosyllabic preposition *on* is a closer translation of the Old English *forð* and avoids the incongruous funereal connotations of the phrase *passed away*, as used in Tolkien's verse translation. Departing so fundamentally from the form of the original poem and forgoing the requirements of metrical imitation affects the rhythm, sound-structure, and meaning of Tolkien's prose translation.

Tolkien maintains surface-level fidelity to the form of the original poem, evoking it through impressionistic yet diverse rhythmical qualities. For example, the second sentence resembles a bi-partite alliterative verse line, its pair of two-stress phrases balanced either side of the rhythmically unobtrusive verb *was*. Tolkien's prose, unlike Old English poetry, employs more than alliteration as a linking device for such pairings. Rhyme, for example, connects the words *Afloat* and *boat* here, as well as *day* and *way* in the fifth sentence. Lexically, *waves* and *cliffs* mirror each other as plural nouns, and the preposition+definite article combination *upon the* and *beneath the* echo each other rhythmically as clusters of unstressed syllables between stresses. Similar rhythmical doubling occurs between *waves of the deep* and *sped by the wind*, which are also bridged by the unobtrusive verb *went*. These also show how easily and naturally Tolkien's prose accommodates choriambic phrases. The third sentence, in comprising four two-beat phrases within two clauses and thereby resembling a pair of alliterative verse lines, exhibits a more complex rhythmical structure. The three light syllables in *Eagerly the warriors* become two in *mounted the prow*, then one in *streaming seas*, before returning to three in *swirled upon the sand*. This creates a rhythmical envelope pattern within the sentence. Tolkien varies the number of intervening light syllables in his two-stress phrases to modify the rhythm of his translation and prevent the prose becoming monotonous. Tolkien observes that alliterative verse lines are "founded on a balance; an opposition between two

[18] Three-position verses are permissible in Old Norse alliterative verse, a fact Tolkien faithfully imitates in his Eddaic "Lays," as Goering observes (2015, 31–2).

halves of roughly equivalent phonetic weight . . . which are more often rhythmically contrasted than similar" (2006a, 30).[19] I would argue that Tolkien's prose translation captures something of this rhythmical contrast in the varied lilt and movement of its two-stress phrasing.

In imitative translation, both word choice and word order are heavily influenced by the alliterative patterning of the original poem. In his prose translation, Tolkien is free to use sound-patterning in more innovative and resourceful ways while nevertheless evoking that of the original. The abundance of /s/ alliteration in *streaming seas swirled upon the sand* captures the sound patterning of *Streamas wundon, / sund wið sande* (212b–13a) as well as its onomatopoeic qualities. As these half-lines demonstrate, occasionally the same alliteration is used across successive lines in Old English poetry. In Tolkien's prose, similarly, alliteration may extend beyond four-beat phrases as in the sequence *bore*, *bosom*, and *bright*, in which the insistent alliteration contrasts with the variety of word class. Impermissible in Old English metre but natural and effective in Tolkien's translation is the bracketing pattern of alliteration in the fifth sentence on the words *waves* and *wind*. More subtly, the plosive velars /k/ and /g/ in *cunning gear* recall the similarly off-kilter alliteration of *gūðsearo ġeatolic̄* (215a), in which the hard /g/ alliterates with the palatal approximant /j/. A similar sound combination occurs in the phrase *cliffs beside the ocean gleaming*, which resembles the combination of velars and labials in *brim**cli**fu b**lic**an* (222a), as highlighted. The form of Tolkien's prose translation allows him to maintain a double fidelity to both the sound structure and the meaning of the original poem. This form also grants Tolkien a double liberty to imitate or expand the alliteration of the original and to abandon it when it risks compromising the meaning.

The metrical and alliterative constituents of alliterative verse do occasionally cause Tolkien's imitative translation to depart from the meaning of the original text. His prose translation, not being subject to these conditions, is free to translate much more faithfully. For example, the plural *waves* is a verbatim translation of *ȳðum* (210b), while the singular *tide* (210b) is required for alliteration with *Time* (210a). Similarly, *prow* is closer to the Old English *stefn* (212b), while *bows* (211b) is required for alliteration with *bank* and *boat* (211a). The peculiar phrase "valiant-timbered" (216b) translating *wudu bundenne* (216b), "joined wood," shows Tolkien misled into abstraction by the requirements of alliteration, in this case on *voyage* (216a). In his prose translation Tolkien gives the boat a *curving beak*, a subtle reference to it being *fugle ġelīcost* "most like a bird" (218b). In his verse translation, meanwhile, alliteration requires that the "fleet, foam-throated ship" (218a) become apparently airborne as a "flying bird"

[19] For more detail on this technique, see Lehmann (1975).

(218b), only to *wade* on its course in the following line. Morphologically, *glad voyage* is closer to *wilsīð* (216a) than "to voyage gladly" (216a), and *They gave thanks to God* is closer syntactically to *Gode þancedon* (227b), where *God* is in the dative. Also, the monosyllabic *thanked* (227b) creates a gap in the verse translation that Tolkien awkwardly fills with the superfluous adverb *then*. Altogether, Tolkien's prose translation evokes the sound-patterning of the original without being obligated to imitate it. Tolkien varies the rhythm and sound-patterning of his prose translation freely and creatively while nonetheless prioritising his pedagogical translation strategy in conveying the meaning of the original.

8. Conclusion

The more one moves toward a rainbow, the further away it seems to get. The process of translation is similar in that the more a target text attempts to imitate its source text, the more it actually distorts it. A translator who closely follows the source text to which their translation is intrinsically bound must struggle to balance both its form and content without unduly compromising either. As a means of conveying both the form and content of *Beowulf*, imitative translation may be more a hindrance than a help. Translating from a dead language that happens to be the ancestor of the target language is already uncannily difficult. To translate from and into a verse form that historically fell out of use as this language developed is effectively impossible, as my analyses have demonstrated. The game is not the same if you have to change the rules and so, as Lehmann herself has succinctly advocated, "To each language its own verse forms" (1979, 126).

Appreciation of the original text of *Beowulf* is arguably better facilitated by prose translation. This leaves the original verse form in its native linguistic context while providing an efficient means for readers to approach it on its (and their) own terms. A literal word-for-word translation such as John Porter's (1991) invites a word-by-word appreciation of the original that likely appeals to the philologist more than the general reader or student. Tolkien's translation of *Beowulf* demonstrates that prose need not forgo the rhythm, sound-structure, or general feel of alliterative verse. Freed from the necessity of imitation, however, it allows these elements to be incorporated variously and voluntarily to convey the meaning, with form promoting rather than compromising content. The reading, writing, and study of *Beowulf* in translation—imitative or otherwise—remains doubly rewarding. It not only makes the Old English poem accessible for a modern English readership but also reframes how we look at our living language historically, technically, and literarily.

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