Bawling and Brawling: Why the vibrant Old English poetic tradition is more than 'ape's bumfodder'

By Susan Irvine

The Complete Old English Poems. Translated by Craig Williamson. Introduced by Tom Shippey. 1,248 pp. University of Pennsylvania Press. £50 (US $59.95). 978 0 8122 4847 0

Beowulf. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. 264 pp. Yale University Press. £20 (US $26). 978 0 300 22888 5.

Leonard Neidorf. *The Transmission of "Beowulf": Language, culture, and scribal behavior*. 224 pp. Cornell University Press. $55. 978 1 5017 0511 3.

Corinne Dale. *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles*. 227 pp. Boydell and Brewer. £60. 978 1 84384 464 8.

"Oxford Dons call for slaying of Beowulf" ran the headline in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1998, as battle lines were drawn in the simmering feud over retaining compulsory Old English at the University of Oxford. Two years later, for the *THES*, it was "goodbye to *Beowulf*" when the voting found in favour of making Old English optional. Philip Larkin, who famously referred to Old English poetry as "ape's bumfodder", would presumably have lost little sleep over this. But for many devotees of Old English, Oxford's decision apparently marked a gloomy turning point for the future of a subject which for a long time had garnered little public appeal and which undergraduates increasingly seemed to view as irrelevant.

Even as Oxford was cutting the cord, however, initiatives from elsewhere were breathing new life into the subject that would prove such fears to be unfounded. Chief among these was the publication of Seamus Heaney's justly acclaimed verse translation of *Beowulf*, which won the Whitbread Prize in 2000. Hard on its heels came the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, released in 2001, 2002 and 2003 respectively, its echoes of *Beowulf* once again bringing the poem to the fore. Publicity for the poem of a more notorious kind was fostered by Zemecki's *Beowulf* (2007), particularly through its casting of Angelina Jolie as Grendel's mother, and more recently (2014) a flurry of media coverage accompanied the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's own prose translation of *Beowulf* (2014).

For all the (mainly) welcome light that such ventures have shed on the imaginative depth of the Old English literary tradition, one might be forgiven for thinking that the poetic corpus extended little beyond *Beowulf* itself. But the publication of Craig Williamson's translation of *The Complete Old English Poems* puts paid to any such impression. Here a whole poetic culture is laid out in all its richness and variety. So *Beowulf* is there, of course, but alongside it (as in the manuscript) is the less well known poem *Judith*, another tale –very different in kind – of a heroic and virtuous monster-slayer. Here is the "monster":

> Holofernes the gift-giver, gold-lord of men,
> Poured out the wine, roared and shouted,
> Laughed up a storm, stumbled about,
> Bellowing like a bull, bawling and brawling.

Williamson's language captures the raucous exuberance of the original, combining the latter's poetic techniques (such as two-stress half-lines, alliteration and internal rhyme) with powerfully evocative modern English words. Judith, inspired by courage from God, cuts down "this dark dealer of death, / This wielder of wickedness, this pernicious lord", and is awarded ultimately not only with a place in heaven but also with "everything the arrogant / General owned, from riches to rings, / Trinkets to treasure, gemstones to gold". The translations are not literal, nor are they intended to be, but they convey with flair the meanings and rhetorical intricacy of the originals.

While the better known of the poems are translated in anthologies elsewhere, not least in Williamson's own *"Beowulf" and Other Old English Poems* (2011), a distinctive feature of this volume is the new poetic renderings of many Old English poems that have never, or only rarely, been previously translated into modern verse. Amongst these are the wonderfully quirky *Solomon and Saturn* poems, poetic dialogues between the wise Solomon of the Old Testament and Saturn, a pagan prince with knowledge of the ancient world. The linguistic texture of the poems – always enigmatic and elusive, even when at its most vigorously physical – is skilfully reproduced here. Here, for example, is his description of the letter R, from the section in which the poet anatomizes each of the letters of the words PATER NOSTER in turn:

> R is enraged, the lord of letters,
> And grabs the fiend by his unholy hair,
> Shakes and shivers him, picks up flint

> And shatters his shanks, his spectral shins.
>
> No leech will mend those splintered limbs –
>
> He will never see his knees again.

Through language that evokes both the physical and spiritual worlds, Williamson conveys, just as the Old English poem does, the power that physical words on the page can exert.

Also amongst the previously little-known poems are some which are themselves translations. In *The Meters of Boethius*, Williamson offers a carefully modulated modern English poetic version of the thirty-one Old English poems whose original source is the Latin *metra* of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. The translation of the opening lines of Meter 2, a lament in the voice of Boethius, acknowledges its peculiarly Anglo-Saxon quality:

> Listen! Once I embraced life, singing
>
> Songs of joy. Now my tunes are twisted –
>
> My mournful melodies are winding woe.
>
> Weary with weeping, I cannot conceive
>
> How my fate has turned or celebrate my life
>
> With the sustaining songs I used to sing.
>
> Sometimes my talking is tongue-tied,
>
> My once-wise words, wrenched and wried.

The exclamatory "Listen!" (rendering the characteristically Old English poetic opening *Hwæt* that this poem shares with, for example, *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood*) acts here as the starting point for a deftly nuanced and imaginative response to the poem's themes of past and present, suffering and singing, speech and silence, woven through with words redolent of the idea of binding and being bound. Undoubtedly, the Old English poets were intensely aware of the poetic traditions behind them – Metre 30 calls Homer "the greatest of human shapers, / Skilled and gifted among the Greeks, / A song-smith who crafted powerful poetry" (Williamson's translation) – but Williamson allows proper justice to be done to the strength of their native poetic tradition too.

This is an immense book, not just in size (nearly 1,200 pages, comprising over 31,000 lines of poetry as well as a thought-provoking introduction by Tom Shippey, and Williamson's own prefatory poems and introductions) but also in achievement: it attests both to the sizeable extant corpus of Old English poetry and to the impressive energy and creativeness of

Williamson as translator. Not for him the life of a sluggard, so pithily encapsulated in the short poem *A Proverb from Winfrid's Time*, which he translates as follows:

> The sluggard delays striving for glory,
>
> Never dreams of daring victories
>
> Or successful ventures. He dies alone.

While Williamson offers to contemporary readers a much fuller perspective on Anglo-Saxon poetic culture than has been previously available, there remains room, as ever, for new translations of individual poems. The latest to venture into the busy market of new translations of *Beowulf* is Stephen Mitchell. Unlike Williamson, who comes to the task of translating from a background in Old English, Mitchell apparently taught himself Old English for the purpose, having previously translated various other ancient poetic epics including the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*. Taking an approach similar to that in his other translations, Mitchell aims to find for *Beowulf* a "contemporary language that seems natural and alive" and he does this rather well. Take, for example, the approach of Grendel to the hall:

> Then up from the moor, in a veil of mist,
>
> Grendel came slouching. He bore God's wrath.
>
> The evil brute intended to trap
>
> and eat some human in the great hall.
>
> Under the clouds he crept, until
>
> he saw the mead-hall, glistening with gold.

The short sentences and informal diction, with four-beat lines and a flexible use of alliteration, give pace and a sense of familiarity to the narrative. A similar stylistic and lexical naturalness can be seen even where the tone is more elegiac, as with the poet's response to the deaths of Beowulf and the dragon:

> No other man, however mighty
>
> or daring he was in every deed,
>
> so I have hear, could have succeeded
>
> in braving the noxious breath of that foe
>
> or disturbing the hoard in the treasure-hall
>
> if he found the guardian wide awake there.
>
> These brilliant riches had come to Beowulf
>
> at the cost of his life. Both he and the creature

had finished their time in this fleeting world.

The pathos of this part of the poem is captured here through the elegant restraint of Mitchell's own poetic language.

But just as brilliant riches come to Beowulf at the cost of his life, so the more contemporary feel of Mitchell's translation is achieved only at a price. The value that he places on concision means that he has produced a translation which is 118 lines shorter than the original (3,064 lines rather than 3,182). In the pursuit of succinctness, features of style that are integral to the *Beowulf*-poet's language are inevitably dispensed with: synonyms are often ignored, compound words simplified, and phrases and even whole clauses omitted. When, for example, the poet tells us, as Grendel makes his way towards the hall, that *Sceotend swæfon, / þa þæt hornreced healdan scoldon, / ealle buton anum* (literally "The warriors, those who had to guard the gable hall, slept, all except one"), he leaves us wondering whether this is heroic indifference to danger or abnegation of responsibility (or indeed both) on the part of the warriors. Mitchell's translation, "The warriors slept – all except one", concise as it may be, omits the relative clause altogether. Elsewhere Old English poetic techniques are sacrificed for the sake of clarity and a more colloquial register. Mitchell unpacks the wonderfully compressed Old English metaphors known as kennings: *ofer swanrade* ("over the swan's road") becomes "over the sea where the swans ride", and *ofer ganotes bæð* ("over the gannet's bath") becomes "over / the broad sea where the gannet bathes". Ironically, perhaps, given that Mitchell helpfully provides the original Old English poem on facing pages throughout, his own poetic instincts sometimes seem to take him rather far from the text. His rendering of *Beowulf* has much to offer – narrative momentum, clarity, a sense of the poem's heroic verve, and a contemporary slant – even if his approach does not lend itself to capturing every ambiguity and nuance of the Old English language.

For close engagement with the linguistic idiosyncrasies of *Beowulf*, one may turn to Leonard Neidorf's recent study *The Transmission of "Beowulf": Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior*. Here formidable scholarship provides rich insights into the attitudes and methods of the scribes who made the only surviving copy of *Beowulf*. Neidorf argues that the errors made by the scribes show that they were often confused by the material they had to copy. In order to make sense of authorial words which had become unrecognizable owing to language change, they converted them into words of similar appearance that they did know (a process referred to as "trivialization"). This denotes a desire on the part of the scribes to modernize

the text, to make it comprehensible to a contemporary early eleventh-century audience. But it also reveals that scribes, as they copied, focused mainly on transcribing individual words rather than having the continuous sense of the poem in mind.

Recent critical trends have built on the assumption that Old English scribes shared the same interests, skills and sensibilities as poets. Neidorf counters these views in no uncertain terms, rejecting the theory of the participatory poet-scribe as "a sweeping and highly conjectural interpretation of the evidence for textual variation in parallel texts of Old English poems". For Neidorf, "scribes changed texts not as poets or performers, but as the inspectors and guardians of orthography". In other words, the scribes did their best to transcribe and modernize the words before them, but they weren't always quite up to the job.

Neidorf's evidence is compelling. He cites numerous minor spelling errors (e.g. *þeod* "nation" for *deoð* "death", resulting from confusion of *d* and *ð*) which indicate that scribes struggled with obsolete orthographic conventions. They were similarly baffled by unfamiliar dialect words and rare poetic words. That they responded by trivializing the text is attested in numerous readings: the word *weorc* (labour), nonsensical in its context, occurs because a scribe corrupted the unfamiliar Anglian *wærc* (pain) into a word he did know; even more absurdly, the half-line *gomel on giogoðe* ("the old man in a state of youth") shows the scribe substituting a word common in Old English (*geogoð* "youth") for a word only used in poetry (*giohðo* "sorrow").

A particularly fertile area for identifying trivialization at work, Neidorf shows, is in proper names: several personal names and names of ethnic groups have been obliterated by the scribes' inability to transmit them accurately. Thus the personal name "Eomer" has been replaced by *geomor* ("sorrowful"), and – more contentiously – the Jutes have apparently been corrupted into giants (which would make *mid Eotum* the correct reading rather than the manuscript's *mid eotenum*). Even more intriguing are the instances where aberrant spacing suggests that the scribe was transcribing mechanically but without comprehension: *Merewioingas milts* ("the good will of the Merovingian"), for example, was spaced anomalously – and nonsensically – as *mere wio ingasmilts*.

To support his argument that "scribes did not read *poems* when they copied; they read *words*", Neidorf also brings to bear poems other than *Beowulf*. Comparisons between the *Leiden Riddle* and *Riddle 35*, and the various versions of *Solomon and Saturn I*, Cædmon's *Hymn* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* poems show scribes once again resorting to

trivialization and mechanical transcription as they attempted to "correct" errors and regularize spellings.

Neidorf's approach detaches scribal activity from any kind of creative intervention. His case depends on acceptance of his view that the manuscript of *Beowulf* presents a late copy of an early poem (composed around 700), and this will not find favour with all critics. But the evidence that he puts forward in this book, based on rigorous scrutiny of several hundred errors in *Beowulf*, is both fascinating and highly persuasive, and the book is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the manuscript context of *Beowulf*, scribal culture in Anglo-Saxon England more generally, or the early history of the English language.

Book-length studies devoted to *Beowulf* have not been lacking over recent decades. But Old English poetry, as witnessed above, is not just about one poem of 3,182 lines. It also boasts some extraordinary miniatures, in riddle form, and these are the subject of Corinne Dale's recent study *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles*. In this book ecocriticism and ecotheology are deployed as an interpretive framework for the Old English riddles. Focusing on a few carefully selected riddles – 38 and 72 ("ox"); 26 ("book"/"bible"); 53 ("battering ram"/"cross"/"gallows") and 73 ("bow"); 83 ("ore"); 11 ("wine") and 27 ("mead"); 84 ("water") and 1/2/3 ("storm") – Dale argues that the riddles' interest in the relationship between humanity and nature is informed by "a degree of sympathy towards, or concern for, the natural world and its use by humans". So Riddle 26 begins by depicting a *feond* (enemy) killing an animal and subjecting its skin to a tortuous process of soaking, drying and cutting, and in doing so takes account of the plight of the animal made into a book by a craftsman. In Riddle 73 a living tree, nurtured in its natural environment, is cut down and enslaved for use as a bow (*ic scolde wiþ gesceape minum / on bonan willan bugan hwilum* "I must against my nature, bend to a killer's will"). Riddle 27, a depiction of honey being brought into the hive by bees and turned into mead, which then exercises power over its human creator, Dale reads as "an ecologically aware resistance narrative in which the natural resource gains mastery over humans". In Riddle 83 Dale finds a metaphor of human usurpation which reveals anxieties about the use of resources and suggests that the writer saw the removal of ore as violent and unjust. Throughout her analyses, Dale proposes provocative links with biblical and other religious material with which the riddlers may have been familiar, and draws parallels with other Old English poems, such as *Beowulf*, *The Phoenix* and *The Dream of the Rood*).

A book with as dominant a theoretical framework as this runs the risk of bulldozing its primary sources into line with its thesis, but Dale on the whole manages not to lose sight of the wider picture even as she makes a strong case for the place of "green studies" in Old English literature. *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles*, along with the other three books reviewed here, attest to the vitality of scholarship in the field of Old English, and to the fascination which the literary creativity of Old English poets holds for modern-day writers and audiences.