

Thomas Meyer, *Beowulf: A Translation* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012). 312 pp. \$15.00 / €14.00 Print + Open-Access E-book

<<http://punctumbooks.com/titles/thomas-meyer-beowulf/>>,

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Review

Thomas Meyer's *Beowulf: A Translation* should perhaps be called *Beowulf: An Interpretation*, because it is just that – an interpretation as much as a translation. Meyer himself refers to it as a 'commentary' in an interview included as an appendix (p. 266), while the editor considers the piece 'an experimental poetic adventure' (p. 1). The Anglo-Saxon poem now reads as if it were a modern poem. The kennings are not as obvious as they have been in past translations. The alliteration is still there, albeit in a lesser, more user-friendly form. The overall story remains unchanged. Still, this version is different from all others. Essentially, the book introduces the reader to a new perspective of the *Beowulf* story.

From the beginning, Meyer's *Beowulf* singles itself out from other translations. The manuscript's original opening, 'Hwæt' is given as a straightforward and to-the-point, 'HEY now hear' (p. 41). The often-puzzling Anglo-Saxon *hwæt* is suddenly simplified and understandable, yet using capitalisation where the reader is not expecting, it still manages to stress the picture of a mead-hall, full of warriors, waiting to hear the story of a famous hero.

In fact, throughout the book, the changed words combine with an unconventional layout of the page to provide quite a visual interpretation of the tale. There are too many to mention in a short review, but there are some that stand out more than the others. For example, the description of the commotion of battle with Grendel is expressed as 'footstephandclawfiendreachmanbedquicktrick' (p. 89). The words themselves provide a picture of the confusion and panic. Similarly, Beowulf's return to his homeland reads just as one would picture the return of such a hero, with first the questions, 'Well, Beowulf, what happened? Did you calm Hrothgar's storm?', followed

by the affirmation that the Danes should solve their own problems, before the comments that it is good to see Beowulf home, safe and sound (p. 165). Meyer's Beowulf is still the hero, but a more human, down-to-earth one than in previous translations.

The editorial discussion and appendices included add to the book. The rare inclusion of the transcript of a discussion with the author was interesting, and helped to explain the piece's journey from a research project to a published work. The bibliography includes a range of rather standard translations and books related to the poem. However, it also includes a selection of references to works on twentieth century poetry and its criticism, which would appeal to readers with an interest in connecting Meyer's translation to recent rather than early medieval works.

Of additional note is that this version is more accessible than other translations. For readers who prefer a physical copy, it can be purchased in its paper form, but the publisher also provides the book as an open access, downloadable file from its website (<http://punctumbooks.com/titles/thomas-meyer-beowulf/>).

As somewhat of a *Beowulf* traditionalist with a background in medieval history, I know that this book will not appeal to everyone. Readers from a literary background may have a differing opinion of the book. However, it is clear that any reader looking to Thomas Meyer's *Beowulf: A Translation* for a traditional translation of the well-known Anglo-Saxon poem will be disappointed. Most readers will no doubt still prefer Anglo-Saxon heroic epics in their original forms. Scholars of English literature may find the new way of presenting the old text fascinating. However, in reality, this translation would be most suitable for those outside the world of early medieval academia but still having an interest in Anglo-Saxon stories or wider medieval tales in general. However, this version can still have a place in *Beowulf* scholarship, and if the reader is willing to keep an open mind, it is well worth a look.

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