LIUZZA, Roy M. 2000. Beowulf: *A New Verse Translation*. Peterborough: Broadview. 248 pp. $7.95.

Roy Liuzza's *Beowulf* is a proficiently executed project which offers not only a masterly Present Day English translation of the poem with scholarly notes, but also very useful supplementary material, intended to provide a historical and literary context for the reading of the poem. In his preface to this volume, Liuzza claims that "the present work is intended to bring together a readable and reliable translation with adequate notes, a collection of supporting texts and commentary, and an introduction that situates the poem in a literary history" (9). He certainly achieves his purpose: this translation is not only "readable and reliable", but also intense, lively, and manages to communicate the original force of the Old English poem that we sometimes miss in most translations since Burton Raffel's, and which is often set aside for the sake of syntactic or metrical coherence-- something which, in fact, the original poem does not always follow so strictly.

Liuzza divides his introduction into five different parts, each offering brief but straightforward discussions on the main subjects of scholarly controversy in the study of the poem.

In the first section, "*Beowulf* Between Myth and History," we are offered a laudably objective summary or outline of the story in the poem, explaining "parallels between the hero's combat and various elements of Northern Folklore and world mythology" (14), and providing references to the main studies on this particular subject.

In "*Beowulf* Between Song and Text" Liuzza discusses the oral-formulaic elements in the poem as well as the historical and legendary allusions which, he claims, drive "the poem's art and meaning" (23). He also introduces the widely debated subjects of the date of composition and the intended audience of the poem. This leads him to ask "why did an English poet feel drawn to work this old material into such a powerful story?" (27), to which he tries to give an answer discussing the origin of the poem and the theme of heroism, and framing *Beowulf* in its historical context. He finally concludes that "stories of generous and noble heroes like Beowulf may have served as a kind of 'invention of tradition' (in Eric Hobsbawm's phrase) for

the demoralized English nation in the face of Danish attack" (29). This, however, may be somewhat confusing, taking into account that he does not discuss the theory claiming that the *Beowulf* poet condemns paganism and the heroic ideal, which is also a matter of neverending controversy, till the following part of the introduction. His assertion (following J. Earl and C. Davis) that the poem "celebrates the warrior in heroic isolation" (29) is maybe too quick too, for the same reason.

In this same section he also defines *Beowulf* as "Obscure in its origins, inarticulate in its purposes, enigmatic in its history" (20). This and his reference to the poem's "allusive complexity" (21) lead him to a brief discussion on the "digressions" in the poem, giving the main scholarly opinions on the subject; though he finally chooses to agree with Leyerle that "there are no digressions in *Beowulf*" (qtd p. 30), in the sense that every one of the so- called digressions has a specific purpose in the development of the story.

In "*Beowulf* Between Court and Cloister" Liuzza discusses the Pagan/Christian dichotomy, noting that "Critics of *Beowulf* are divided on many issues, but none is more important than the significance of the poem's religious elements" (31). He points out the most extreme positions, as Cabaniss and McNamee's theory that Beowulf is a type of Christ or Goldsmith's opinion that the *Beowulf* poet condemns paganism and heroism. He also mentions the scholarly trend claiming "that the poem's origin and ethos are essentially pagan" (31). Liuzza detaches himself from all of them and takes a safe (and the commonest) intermediate position by claiming that:

> These two extreme positions capture quite dramatically the dilemma caused by what can be regarded as the poem's deliberate ambivalence: *Beowulf* is a secular Christian poem about pagans which avoids the easy alternatives of automatic condemnation or enthusiastic anachronism (32).

In this part of the introduction, which is a fairly difficult task to undertake because of the complexity of the subject it deals with, Liuzza sometimes seems to be assuming that the reader is familiar with the controversy in question and the different scholarly positions. Thus, to the newcomer to the field, some of his assertions may seem contradictory, but

this is no more than a reflection of the numerous inner contradictions of the poem, to which we are exposed as soon as we decide to devote ourselves to the serious study of *Beowulf*.

In "*Beowulf* Between Old and Modern English", Liuzza briefly explains the basic Old English poetical features: variations, appositions, repetitions, formulae, and so forth. He also discusses here some of the problems he encountered when facing translation, and adds a (kind of) review of his own translation and a statement of his main purposes when undertaking the task.

Thus, this introduction concentrates in less than forty pages all the main points of scholarly discussion and basic controversies in *Beowulf* studies, and reflects no doubt Liuzza's knowlegde of the poem as well as his dedication and devotion to it. For students, this introduction will be more helpful than most guides to *Beowulf*, of which most (as Nicholson's or Baker's) are compilations of renowned essays. Bjork and Niles' *A* Beowulf *Handbook* is the only one which presents a general overview of all the main controversies in *Beowulf* studies, but it is too complex and dense for the average undergraduate.

The translation of the poem, for which Liuzza follows mostly Klaeber's text --though he adopts some of the emendations suggested by Mitchell and Robinson and some other editors-- is, as claimed above, faithful to the original in that it does not fail to transmit its liveliness and intensity. Furthermore, many of the characteristic features of Old English poetry are retained, as quite a few kenningar and metonymies (with explanatory notes), thus adding to that same effect to which every serious reader of *Beowulf* feels so attracted, and which is, according to many, the most appealing feature of the poem. This is his translation of the moment in which Beowulf realizes that his sword fails to harm Grendel's mother (ll.1518- 1522 a):

> Then the worthy man saw that water- witch,
> A great mere- wife; he gave a mighty blow
> With his battle- sword— he did not temper that stroke—
> So that the ring- etched blade rang out on her head
> A greedy battle- song (100).

The meter is somewhat irregular (as it is in the original poem, in fact). Liuzza tries to stick to a four stress pattern with a medial pause, and alliterative sounds, though "these are by no means as marked as they are in the original, and on rare occasion are foregone altogether" (47). But as the translator himself claims, "As with any translation certain effects are lost in the pursuit of others" (47). Liuzza admits he has chosen to place "fluency and precision at the top of ... [his] list of goals" (47). He is not "trying to make Old English out of Modern English" (46) either, so that it does not sound odd to the modern ear. The use of archaisms is, for that same reason, consciously avoided. Most *Beowulf* translators (Donaldson, for instance, to name a very popular translation) preserve or even overexploit the use of archaisms in their texts in order to stress the poem's ancient character. However, the outcome of their effort is bound to prove awkward and tedious.

The extent to which Liuzza is concerned about preserving the sense of the original text drives him to translate the half- line "Gaeth a wyrd swa hio scel" (455b) as "*wyrd* always goes as it must!"(pg.67). 'Wyrd' is an untranslatable Old English word (normally translated as simply 'fate' by those interested in highlighting the poem's pagan essence or 'providence' by those who would rather stress its Christian coloring) whose meaning and sense pervade the poem. Liuzza chooses to retain the original and add an explanatory note discussing the range of meaning of the Old English word.

The so- called "Lament of the Last Survivor" is one of the most widely-known amongst the key passages of the poem. Critics of translations frequently resort to it to illustrate their claims, since it is a highly evocative passage which reflects important aspects of Anglo- Saxon culture in general and central issues of the poem in particular (as the importance of *wyrd*). Liuzza translates the first lines of this passage as follows:

Hold now, o thou earth, for heroes cannot,	Heald þu nu, hruse, nu haeleð ne mostan,
the wealth of men—Lo, from you long ago	eorla aehte! Hwaet hyt aer on ðe
those good ones first obtained it! Death in war,	gode begeaton. Guð-deað fornam,
and awful deadly harm have swept away	feorh-bealo frecne, fyra gehwylcne
all of my people who have passed from life,	leoda minra, þara ðe þis lif ofgeaf,
and left the joyfull hall. Now have I none	gesawon sele-dream; nah, hwa sweord wege
to bear the sword or burnish the bright cup,	oððe feormie faeted waege,

the precious vessel -all that host has fled (122) drync-faet deore; duguð ellor scoc (2247- 54).

As seen here, Liuzza endeavors to follow the original text very closely, but adopts the Old English metrical patterns only up to an extent that will prevent his translation from sounding awkward to the modern ear. The result is thus a *Beowulf* which is both faithful to the original and comprehensible; its meaning not at all obscured by labored attempts at conforming to cumbersome structures. Rather, this translation flows in a smooth continuity.

As it is common in most *Beowulf* translations, Liuzza includes a glossary of the proper names found in the poem, as well as the Geats, Danes, and Swedes' family trees. He also adds a helpful reconstruction of the Geatish-Swedish wars, presenting the "fortunes of the Geatish royal house" in chronological order, since they are far from being "told in a straightforward way" (157) in the poem.

The translation is followed by five appendixes with explanatory notes, which are very useful to help contextualize *Beowulf* in its literary, historical, cultural, and academic background. Appendixes A and B focus on the poem's sources and its allusions: "Characters Mentioned in *Beowulf*" introduces some of the characters in the poem as they appear in other sources, as King Hygelac, Beowulf the Dane, or Finn. "Analogues to themes and events in *Beowulf*" includes relevant excerpts from *Grettis Saga*, Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* and *Ynglinga Saga*, *The Life of Saint Gildas*, and the *Blickling Homilies*; offering thus a good general survey of some of the main parallels to the Beowulf story.

Appendixes C and D offer information about the original context of the poem:

In "Christians and Pagans," we find some translations of well- known documents dating from the late sixth to the late tenth century showing, on the one hand, to what extent Christianity was rooted in Anglo- Saxon society at the time of composition of *Beowulf* and, on the other, the extent to which the condemnation of the pagan past was or was not prevalent. "Contexts for Reading *Beowulf*," includes some selections of manuscripts dating from the approximate time of the copying of the *Beowulf* codex, offering thus a

literary context for the poem. Furthermore, "each comments, in some way, on the central themes of the poem" (196).

In Appendix E: "Translations of *Beowulf*," Liuzza brings together twenty different translations of "the coastguard's speech" (ll. 229- 257 in the poem); from Sharon Turner's (1805) to Frederick Rebsamen's (1991); trying to illustrate how differently (even divergently) things can be interpreted depending on who reads them and when. Liuzza tries to prove that "The history of the poem in modern English reflects not only progress in linguistic and historical knowledge but changes in attitudes towards the poem's meaning and style" (212).

This new translation of *Beowulf*, thus, offers fairly good supplementary material which is extremely useful for both the scholar and the student, and makes an excellent "textbook" for teachers and students of this "unruly poem" (16). The prize ($ 7.95 in the US) makes it also affordable for everyone interested in the subject.

Since Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* and Liuzza's came to the reading public at about the same time, it may seem unavoidable to offer at least a quick comparison of both texts: Liuzza's shows the skill of an expert, he includes explanatory notes, scholarly references, and additional readings; the only thing I missed was an Old English facing- page version. Heaney does use the facing- page format in the bilingual edition, but his *Beowulf* seems to me more a popularization of the poem (in the sense that he tries to offer the general reading public an easy- to read version of a poem renowned for its complexity) than a serious scholarly translation. It may be useful for initially catching the student's interest, but not as a textbook. For a facing- page format, I would rather stick to the more reliable version by Howell D. Chickering.

As a final note, I think it suitable to add that an errata list was sent by Roy Liuzza to all Ansaxnet list members, still available in the Ansaxdat database for both subscribers and non- subscribers to the list. (http://www.mun.ca/Ansaxdat).

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