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WILLIAM MORRIS'S TRANSLATION OF *BEOWULF*:

STUDIES IN HIS VOCABULARY

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It is perhaps the worst thing he ever wrote, quite incomprehensible without a glossary, in effect a parody in English gibberish.¹

It is scarcely surprising, in view of current opinion (characterised by this severe judgement of the Morris critic, Thompson) that Morris's translation of *Beowulf* is not now well known. First published in a limited edition of three hundred and eight copies in 1895, it was reprinted in 1904 and 1910. It was included in Volume X of the *Collected Works of William Morris* (1911), but was not again published separately. However, critical opinion of the translation in Morris's day was more sympathetic:

But if the business of the translator of an ancient poem is to pour the old wine into the new bottles with as little loss as possible of its original aroma, Mr. Morris's efforts have been crowned with entire success.²

Taken together, both views draw attention to what I see as the positive and negative aspects of Morris's achievement in his translation. Morris attempted in his *Beowulf* to retain as much of the style and language of the

original as possible, in order to give his reader the impression that he was reading the poem in a form of English that would recall the Old English. Laudable though this aim may be, in that it signifies a total respect for the original, it also carries the danger that, in retaining too much that was alien, the translation would not be readily understood. Morris's translation, is, of course, like all translations, an attempt to balance the demands of the original text with those of his reader. The mere fact, however, that he was obliged to append a glossary to his translation shows that he was, at the very least, partially unsuccessful. The problems, as Quirk has pointed out with regard to Morris's translations from the Old Norse,³ were no less for his own readership than for readers today, since the forms that he used were so often modelled on forms within the languages from which he was translating.⁴ It is the purpose of this paper to explore some of the ways in which Morris handled the lexis of *Beowulf* in order to make it accessible to a readership that was not versed in Old English. It is hoped that such a study will not only re-affirm the seriousness of Morris's intention and his respect for the text, but will also show that once the principles of his method are grasped, many of the apparent obscurities will become clear. At the same time, it has to be admitted that the glossary is inadequate and should have been expanded.

That Morris should have been attracted to *Beowulf* was natural enough. As an Oxford undergraduate he developed an interest in medieval literature and culture which he was to retain for the rest of his life. His philosophy and outlook on life were in large part shaped by the medieval and it was his aim to restore the arts in nineteenth-century England to their medieval role, with the artist as craftsman. From the literature of medieval Europe, Morris turned to that of medieval Iceland, where he found a tougher, more earth-bound attitude to life. He learnt Icelandic under the Oxford scholar Eiríkr Magnússon and, with his help, translated a number of the sagas into

English during the years 1869-75. In these can be seen the development of his attitude towards the problem of translation that was to influence his work on *Beowulf*. He was careful not only to convey the meaning of his original, but also something of its flavour, by using consciously archaic words, especially of Germanic origin. The resulting translations are reasonably accurate, but often difficult to read.

In 1892, towards the end of his life, Morris turned from the literature of medieval Iceland to that literature in his own culture which most resembled it - *Beowulf*. That he regarded the poem as a masterpiece is clear from remarks made by him. For example, in his lecture on *The Gothic Revival* (March 3rd. 1884), he refers to the small amount of early Anglo-Saxon poetry as follows:

fragments of songs of the early Germanic invaders among which towers majestically the noble poem of *Beowulf*, unsurpassed for simplicity and strength by any poem of our later tongue.⁵

Beowulf was already widely available in translations at this time. Eight complete translations of the poem into English had been published before that by Morris appeared in 1895.⁶ Those by Earle and Hall were both published in 1892 and that by Garnell went into its third edition in the same year. Yet, in a letter to A.J. Wyatt,⁷ Morris expresses his dissatisfaction with previous versions and writes of his intention to produce another. As with his translations from the Old Norse, Morris's approach was scholarly. He was concerned to work from an accurate understanding of the text and contacted the Cambridge scholar A.J. Wyatt, who provided him with a prose translation which Morris turned into verse. Although Morris claimed not to know Old English,⁸ it is perfectly clear from the translation that emerged that he had a reasonable knowledge of it. His verse lines correspond remarkably closely with those of the original, and his treatment of the kennings and other compounds of the Old English text shows that, in general,

he had a clear understanding of the nature of the language. It is probably right to assume that Morris had a fair grasp of the text and used Wyatt's translation as a guide or check (particularly for the difficult and controversial passages). Certainly, although the translation was published as the work of both Morris and Wyatt, Wyatt did not regard it as his, and later Morris seems also to have regarded it as his own work.⁹

From Morris's correspondence with Wyatt, it is clear that there was some disagreement over Morris's use of archaisms and the consequent need for a glossary. Significantly, it is this point that still troubles readers today. Morris, in fact, saw no real need for a glossary at all:

As to the glossary; I think our views as to what is wanted in this case differ; or rather we have not quite understood one another. I thought that all we wanted was a few very unusual words taken from Middle English, such as *brim* or *worth*, and perhaps one or two sentences, though I think these would mostly explain themselves by the context, except the few words *afore-said*. Almost all in the glossary I should not hesitate to use in an original of my own, you see, and I don't think it would need a glossary.¹⁰

In the end, the translation was accompanied by a glossary of seventy-eight items, a number which is hardly enough to enable someone with no knowledge of Old English to read through the translation easily and accurately. In fairness to Morris, as suggested by his letter to Wyatt quoted above, many of the archaisms would have been familiar to readers of poetry¹¹ and, of course, to readers of Morris's own translations from the Old Norse. Still, the chief barrier to his *Beowulf*'s success was, and is, its vocabulary.

A general impression created by a rapid reading of the translation is that Morris has generally avoided using words of French origin to translate Old English words which have no modern representative. (Indeed, Eiríkr Magnússon reports that Morris resented Romance words, which he felt were alien to English.¹²) As a general rule, this is confirmed by detailed

examination. In the first one hundred lines of Morris's translation, for instance, only twenty-eight words are of French origin. Most are used where there is no obvious alternative derived from Old English. Thus, 'treasure' (36,41) translates *mādma* (and elsewhere *sinc*), 'valour' (3) translates *ellen*, 'heroes' (52) translates *hæleð*, 'ancient' (58) translates *gamol* and 'clear' (90) translates *swutol*. This pattern is repeated throughout the poem. Other examples that occur regularly are: 'prince', which commonly translates *pēoden*; 'battle', for both *hild* and *wig*; 'terror' for *egesā*; 'realm' for *rīce*; 'joy' for *drēam*, *wyn* (also sometimes translated by 'joyance') or *gefēa*; 'heritage' for *yrfe*; and 'monster' for *āglāca*. In fact, study of the text as a whole reveals a surprising number of French words. Also, although their use can usually be explained, there are a few instances where Morris would seem to depart from his usual practice of using a native word if at all possible. Thus, at 1024 *beorn* is translated by 'hero' (which is normally used for *hæleð*) but is elsewhere usually translated by 'berne' (as at 2433); a form which is listed in the glossary. Nor can Morris's use of 'hero' at 1024 be explained by the requirements of alliteration, which Morris is always careful to follow. Thus, the half-line *beforan beorn beran* (1024) appears in Morris as 'bear forth to the hero', whereas 'bear forth to the berne' could reasonably have been expected (as at 2433, where *beorn in burgum* is translated by 'a berne in his burgs'). Similar variation can be seen in Morris's translation of OE *cempa*, which normally appears as 'champion', but at 1544 and 1551 appears as 'kemp'; a northern representative of the Old English form (or its Old Norse cognate) which Morris lists in his glossary. In view of the occurrence of the form 'kemp' in the glossary, it is odd that Morris does not choose to use it more often; particularly as its substitution would not usually affect the alliteration. Particularly odd is Morris's translation of *fēpe-/fēðe-cempa*, which at 1544 is translated by 'foot-kemp' and at 2853 by 'foot-

champion'. Mention may also be made in this connection of the single use by Morris of 'eme' (881) to translate ĕam, and which he lists in his glossary. In view of his use of the phrase 'uncle and nephew' (1164) to translate suhter-gefaderan (Wyatt's form), Morris could well have spared the reader the task of consulting the glossary for this single occurrence if at 881 he had translated ĕam his nefan as 'the uncle to his nephew', rather than 'the eme to his nephew'. Finally, variation can also be seen in his translations of lĕod and þĕod. 'Folk' and 'people' are used to translate both, though where 'people' is used, it is generally for lĕod. At line 643 ðĕod is translated by 'people', where it was probably chosen to alliterate with 'proud' in the same line, but this is not the case at 899, where wer-þĕode is also translated by 'people'. The point should also be made that, in the case of 'folk' and 'people' particularly, Morris may well have varied their use on stylistic grounds. 'Folk' is a word that is much used in his poem. Not only does he regularly use it to translate folc and frequently to translate lĕod and þĕod, but it also appears occasionally as a translation of weras (216), werod (319) and cyn (461). Furthermore, Morris frequently uses it as a compounding element, by which, for example, 'Danes' become 'Dane-folk' (242 etc.), 'Geats' become 'Geat-folk' (378 etc.) and 'men' become 'men-folk' (233 etc.).

In summary, it may be said that Morris does generally avoid French words, unless there is no modern representative of an Old English word. Where there are exceptions to this practice, it is usually, though not always, caused by his desire to reproduce an alliterating line or, perhaps, to introduce stylistic variation.

Morris shows himself particularly receptive to the style of the Old English text in his treatment of kennings and other compounds. He preserves a high proportion of those in the original, and also creates new ones, thus emphasizing this important Old English poetic device and giving his

translation a distinctively Germanic flavour which is further helped by his general avoidance of words of French origin. Thus, in the first hundred lines, he retains, among others, 'whale-road' (10) (hron-rād), 'fee-gifts' (21) (feoh-gift), 'war-eager' (58) (gūð-rĕouw), 'war-speed' (64) (here-spĕd), 'hall-house' (68) (heal-reced), 'mead-hall' (69) (medo-arn), 'middle-garth' (75) (middan-gearð), 'folk-steed' (76) (folc-stede), 'edge-hate' (84) (ecg-hete) and 'slaughter-strife' (85) (wæl-nið). Of course, while Morris's liberal use of compounded forms may create a feeling for the original, it often makes comprehension difficult. Even where the individual elements may be understood, an audience unfamiliar with this device may find it difficult to interpret. Only eight compounds merit an explanation in Morris's glossary, though many others could only make sense to a reader who was familiar with Old English. Among the examples that could well have been added to the glossary are: 'breast-worship' (2504), as a translation of brĕost-weorðung (meaning 'breast-adornments'); 'battle-sharded' (2829) for heaðo-sceard (meaning 'hacked in battle'); 'back-fare' (2783) for eft-sið (meaning 'journey back'); 'float-host' (2915) for flot-here (meaning 'sea-army'); 'ground-herder' (2136) for grund-hyrde (meaning 'guardian of the deep'); 'slaughter-race' (2101) for wæl-ræs (meaning 'deadly onslaught'); 'war-race' (2991) for gūð-ræs (meaning 'onrush of battle'); 'folk-scather' (2093, 2278, 2688) for lĕod-sceaða (2093) and ðĕod-þĕod-sceaða (2278, 2688) (meaning 'injurer of the people') and 'battle-deer' (2107) for hilde-dĕor (meaning 'bold in battle'). Although in several of the above instances, Morris has substituted a familiar form for one of the compounded elements, the meaning, even in context, is not immediately clear. What, for example, are we to make of 'breast-worship' in the following lines?

He nowise the fretwork to the King of the Friesians,
The breast-worship to wit, might bring any more,
But cringed in battle that herd of the banner,
The Atheling in might. (2503-2506)

Of course, the problem is aggravated by the occurrence of other words which might be unfamiliar. 'Herd' and 'Atheling' occur frequently throughout the translation and the reader would quickly get used to them. More obscure, however, is the unglossed 'fretwork', which is Morris's translation of fretwe (meaning 'adornments'). A further obvious difficulty is the unfamiliar syntax, which closely follows the Old English. Modern English syntax would re-arrange the lines to read: 'He might not bring the fretwork, the breast-worship to wit, to the King of the Priesians any more; but that herd of the banner, the Atheling in might, cringed in battle.' Morris's attempt to reproduce the syntactical patterns of the original is a further sign of his respect for the text and his desire to recreate it as closely as possible. As with his treatment of the vocabulary, once the patterns are understood the problem for the reader is lessened.

Morris translates kennings and compounds as he translates other forms. Wherever possible, each Old English element is translated by its modern representative. In the case of 'end-day' (3035) (for ende-dæg) and 'earth-wall' (3090) (for eorð-weall, meaning 'mound' or 'barrow'), both Old English elements are represented by their modern forms. More often, however, substitute forms are needed for one or both elements. Examples of both are included above. Morris also used compounds where there was none in the original. In these cases, he would either construct one on an Old English model or else he would use one that he had used elsewhere. For example, gehðo (3095) is translated by Morris as 'grief-care', on analogy with a compound such as ealdor-cearu 'mortal sorrow', while 'war-round' (2538), by which Morris translates rond (meaning 'shield') simply repeats 'war-round' (2559), where Morris uses it to translate bord-rand.

A further characteristic of Old English, which Morris retained and, to some extent developed, in order to make his translation as Germanic as possible, is the widespread use of prefixes. Thus, for example, he translates

becearf (2138) by 'becarved' and bewunden (2424, 3022) by 'bewounded', but extends this use of the prefix 'be-' to represent many instances of the prefix ge-. For example, ge- as the past participial marker often appears as 'be-', as in 'with limb-craft belocked' (2769) for gelocen leoðo-craeftum; in 'with cunning wiles was it begeared' (2087), for sio wes orðoncum eall gegyrwed; and in 'the breast (was) well beworthy'd' (2176), for brēost (was) geweorðod. Morris also often substitutes a verbal form with the 'be-' prefix for an adjective in a noun phrase. Thus, fāted wāge (2253, 2282) (meaning 'gold-plated flagon') appears in Morris as 'beaker beplated'; hringde byrnan acc. sg. (2615) (meaning 'corslet of interlocked rings') is translated 'the byrny beringed'; and blōðigan gāre dat. sg. (2440) (meaning 'with bloody spear') becomes 'with shaft all bebloody'd'. In all these examples, use of the prefix 'be-' has also resulted in an alliterative pattern based on 'b', which might well have determined its use. This could also explain Morris's translation of se byrn-wiga (2918) a compound which he restructures as 'the warrior bebyrny'd', and which again results in 'b' alliteration.

Other prefixes which are widely used by Morris are 'up-' and 'un-'. In his use of 'un-' he is generally simply giving a literal translation of his original, though this may produce forms which are unfamiliar, though obvious enough not to need mention in his glossary. Thus, 'un-right' (2739) translates un-riht; 'unsoftly' (2140) translates unsōfte; and 'undark' (2000) translates undyzne (meaning 'un-secret'). At 2029 Morris has translated the original's controversial oft seldan as 'oft unseldan', which makes good sense of a passage that is otherwise difficult to interpret. A prefix which Morris commonly attaches to present participles is 'a-', as in 'a-leaving' (2846) and 'a-stirring' (2840). Historically this prefix is a preposition and derives from Old English an/on and in the modern period is associated with archaic or regional (southern) English. Morris's use

of it is generally not based on forms of on/an in his original. It is probable that in using it so often he is simply employing a form which he knew to be archaic in order to distance his text from the present.

As with the prefix un-, retention in his translation of the widespread Old English suffix -scipe frequently results in unfamiliar forms, the meaning of which is not always immediately clear. At 2133, for example, Morris's 'earlship' is a literal translation of eorl-scipe, which here means 'noble deeds'. Morris's lines 2131-2133 hardly make this clear:

Then me did the lord king, and e'en by thy life,
Mood-heavy beseech me that I in the holm-throng
Should do after earlship, my life to adventure.

At line 3006, however, Morris makes the meaning of eorl-scipe clear by translating it 'earlship deeds'. Other examples of unfamiliar forms caused by Morris's retention of the suffix -scipe are: 'warrior-ship work' (1470) to translate driht-scype (meaning 'noble deeds') and 'foeship' (2999) to translate fēond-scipe (meaning 'enmity').

So far, it has been shown that Morris attempted to reproduce in his translation linguistic forms which were characteristic of Old English, though not necessarily of the English of his own day. He retained kennings and compounds wherever possible, sometimes adding ones of his own, and similarly retained and extended the use of certain Old English prefixes and suffixes. The translation that emerges is thus couched in a predominantly Germanic language that is recognizably English, but with archaisms based on Old English usage which may render the work obscure at times. In fact, as Quirk, in his discussion of Morris's translations from Old Norse says:

Many of the most striking and unfamiliar words in Morris are not, properly speaking, archaisms at all: they are rather cases of re-introduction, with new pronunciations and often with new meanings and into new environments, of words or word-elements from a past so distant that they are virtually new words to the reader.¹³

This is certainly also true of Morris's *Beowulf*, though often the 'new

meanings' that he gives to particular words are simply the Old English meaning retained in the modern representative of a word that has undergone semantic shift. Thus, the common 'weird' is used with the sense of Old English wyrd (usually translated by 'fate' or 'destiny'); similarly, 'herd' (e.g. 2027) is used with the sense of Old English hyrde ('keeper' or 'guardian'); and 'glee' (e.g. 2105) is used with the sense of Old English glēo ('music', 'joyful entertainment'). Among the many other examples are: 'mare' (1898) for Old English meaŕh ('horse'); 'bane' (2203) for Old English bona ('slayer, killer'); 'whiles' (2107) for Old English hwīlum ('sometimes'); and 'spell' (2109) for Old English spell ('tale'). None of these items appears in Morris's glossary.

As is clear from his correspondence with Wyatt, Morris attempted to keep his glossary as brief as possible and the glossary that was published was largely made up of: 1) words of restricted currency that were taken more or less from Old English (e.g. 'atheling' (Old English æþeling), 'barm' (Old English bearm), 'berne' (Old English beorn), 'beswealed' (Old English beswēlan), 'birlers' (Old English byrelas n. pl.), 'board' (Old English bord) etc.) and 2) words which have been modelled on the basis of Old English (e.g. 'a-banning' (Old English gebannan), 'arede' (Old English rædan), 'behalsed' (Old English healsian), 'beswinked' (Old English geswencan), 'forwritten' (Old English forscrīfan) etc.). This second category could well have been extended by Morris for, as is argued above, unless the reader is familiar with Old English he is unlikely always to understand new words coined on the basis of it. Among examples of the first category that could usefully have been included are: the northern 'lift' (1913), meaning 'air' (Old English lyft); 'rede' (2027), meaning 'counsel', 'advice' (Old English ræd); 'rathely' (1937), meaning 'quickly' (Old English hraðe); 'gleed' (2652), meaning 'fire', 'flame' (Old English glēd); 'gooms' (2416), meaning 'men' (Old English guma); and 'ere-father'

(2622), meaning 'old-father' (Old English *Ær-fæder*).

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that Morris's translation is not easy to read, and would not have been when published. Yet, many of the difficulties of word-structure, vocabulary and syntax diminish as the principles behind them are grasped. Further, the reader who is familiar with Morris's translations from the Old Norse will already have encountered, and is likely to have overcome, the difficulties caused by unfamiliar usages. Morris's translation repays study because it is a serious attempt, by a literary figure of some consequence, to convey to his readers something of the nature of the text, as well as the meaning, of a great poem from their own culture. As a translation, Morris's *Beowulf* cannot be judged a complete success. The need for a glossary (longer than the one published) demonstrates this. Yet, at the same time, his failure to find a balance between the requirements of his original text on the one hand and his readers on the other, means that his work can be studied with profit by all translators from one form of English into another.

NOTES

The edition of *Beowulf* used above is that edited by A.J. Wyatt (1894, Cambridge), which was the text used by Morris. Morris's translation has been examined here in its second edition (1895, London and New York). Quotations from both texts are followed by their line number, though where both Old English and its translation have the same line number, it is only given once. Old English words quoted in isolation have been given in their dictionary form (i.e. nominative singular for nouns).

1. Thompson, P. (1967), *The Work of William Morris*. (London), p. 163.
2. Unsigned review by Theodore Watts in the *Athenaeum*, 10 August 1895, no. 181-2. Quoted in Faulkner, P. (ed.) (1973), *William Morris. The Critical Heritage*. (London), pp. 385-387.
3. Quirk, R. (1953-55), 'Dasent, Morris and Principles of Translation', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*, XIV, p. 77.
4. For a discussion of the influence of Old Norse usage on Morris's translations from Old Norse and on his literary style in general, see Swannell, J.N. (1961), 'William Morris as an Interpreter of Old Norse', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*, XV,

pp. 365-382.

5. Lemire, E.D. (ed.) (1969), *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*. (Detroit), p. 57. See also p. 163 where, in his lecture on *Early England*, Morris speaks at greater length of the qualities of *Beowulf*.
6. Tinker, C.B. (1903), *The Translations of Beowulf. A Critical Bibliography*. (New York).
7. The letter to A.J. Wyatt, dated 28 August 1892, is included in Henderson, P. (ed.) (1950), *The Letters of William Morris to his family and friends*. (London), p. 351.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Tinker (1903), p. 105.
10. Henderson (1950), p. 362.
11. Morris's debt to the nineteenth-century 'Teutonizers' of English is briefly discussed by Obery, C.H. (1978), *A Pagan Prophet William Morris*. (Charlottesville), p. 105. For the medieval English sources of the language of Morris's prose romances (also relevant to his *Beowulf*), see Swannell (1961), p. 375.
12. Swannell (1961), p. 376.
13. Quirk (1953-55), p. 70.