

November 8, 2013

Did everyone get the first line of Beowulf wrong.. or did Seamus Heaney get it right?

by Claire Kelley

UPDATE: Dr. George Walkden responds below.

Earlier this week, *The Independent* reported that the first line of *Beowulf* has been incorrectly translated for hundreds of years. According to research by Dr. George Walkden, a University of Manchester lecturer, the Old English word *hwæt*, which begins the English language's oldest epic poem ("Hwæt! We Gar-Dena in gear-dagum, þeod-cyninga, þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!"), should not be read as an interjection separate from the rest of the first line ("Listen! we have heard of the might of the kings"), but rather as part of a complete exclamatory sentence—something like "How we have heard of the might of the kings."



A lecturer at the University of Manchester has raised new questions about how the first line of *Beowulf* should be translated.

Citing research that "there's no record of the Anglo-Saxons using exclamation marks, or any other form of punctuation, besides the full stop (or 'point') and the occasional semicolon" Walkden declares all previous interpretations—"What ho!" (Earle 1892), 'Hear me!' (Raffel 1963), 'Attend!' (Alexander 1973), 'Indeed!' (Jack 1994), and 'So!' (Heaney 2000)"—to be wrong.

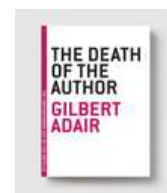
But while Walkden and the University of Manchester quote Seamus Heaney as having using an exclamation point mark (*The Independent* repeats the error), Heaney actually just used a period, choosing to use the word "So." as more of a transition word that is meant to mimic Anglo-Saxon diction and indicate the continuation of the conversation. Heaney explains more in a note on his translation.

"...when the men of the family spoke, the words they uttered came across with a weighty distinctness, phonetic units as separate and defined as delph platters displayed on a dresser shelf... They had a kind of Native American solemnity of utterance, as if they were announcing verdicts rather than making small talk. And when I came to ask myself how I wanted *Beowulf* to sound in my version, I realized I wanted it to be speakable by one of those relatives. I therefore tried to frame the famous opening lines in cadences that would have suited their voices, but that still echoed with the sound and sense of the Anglo-Saxon.

Conventional renderings of *hwæt*, the first word of the poem, tend towards the archaic literary, with 'lo', 'hark', 'behold', 'attend' and – more colloquially – 'listen' being some of the solutions offered previously. But in Hiberno-English Scullion-speak, the particle 'so' came naturally to the rescue, because in that idiom 'so' operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time

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functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention. So, 'so' it was:

*So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns."*

Walkden indicates that he thinks that Heaney's translation is close—he calls it a “substantial achievement” but “ultimately misleading... Like the others, he had no reason to doubt the accepted scholarship on the meaning of the word, so he translated it – brilliantly – with ‘So.’ But that translation now has to be rethought.”

If Heaney's translation is read with the tone he describes—instead of an interjection with an exclamation point, it's to be read as a way of expressing the oral tradition of the epic poem, uttered in dark candlelit halls—perhaps the Nobel laureate's translation is correct after all.

I wrote to **Stephen Mitchell**, translator of classics like *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Iliad*, to find out what he thinks of the new developments. He offered this note:

Not being a linguist, I'm not qualified to give an opinion. But if Dr. Walkden is correct, his understanding would indeed make a subtle but appreciable difference in how a translator deals with the line. I took a few minutes to try it out, and came up with this:

How mighty the Danes were in days gone by
we have heard, and their heroes, the ancient kings:
what prodigious deeds those princes performed!

UPDATE:

In response to my inquiry about the misquoting of Seamus Heaney's translation, Dr. George Walkden wrote this note:

The first part of the press release does attribute “So!” to Heaney's translation, when in fact it should be “So.” Apologies—I should have spotted and corrected this. Further down in the press release, Heaney's translation is discussed in more detail, and the correct form “So.” is given, as it is in the original article upon which this press release is based.

I should emphasize, again, that I am not trying to bash translators, especially not Heaney. Heaney was first and foremost a poet, not a specialist in the Old English language. Heaney was, quite naturally, basing his translation upon decades of scholarship that agreed that hwaet “functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention”, and in that respect his translation is very clever. What I am questioning is the traditional linguistic work on the function and interpretation of hwaet. It is in no way the fault of the translators that they have assumed that this very respectable work is correct.

What my research shows—I think—is that hwaet wasn't a word on its own (an “interjection”). This is supported by comparing hwaet to other Old English interjections: whereas other interjections are often followed by a “point” (the most common form of Old English punctuation) in manuscripts, hwaet never is. hwaet is also unstressed—a fact recognized by Jakob Grimm

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—and it doesn't feature in the list of interjections of a contemporary grammarian, Aelfric. (These aren't actually my findings; they were observed in a 2000 paper by Eric Stanley.) In addition, my own empirical work on clauses preceded by hwaet —not just this one—shows that there's a clear difference in verb position between clauses with hwaet and clauses without it. That fact is completely unexpected if hwaet is not a part of the following clause.

The way I arrive at my own interpretation of hwaet, which accounts for these facts, is pretty complex and I won't try to lay it out here, unless you're interested.

In summary: the exclamation mark is not important, and the only thing Heaney did "wrong" was to trust existing scholarship.

Claire Kelley is the Director of Library and Academic Marketing at Melville House.

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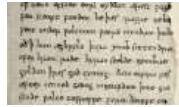
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