



Beowulf: Popularizing an Old English Trolls' Tale

Review Article

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Beowulf: Das angelsächsische Heldenepos über nordische Könige: Neue Prosäübersetzung, Originaltext, versgetreue Stabreimfassung. Übersetzt, kommentiert und mit Anmerkungen versehen von Hans-Jürgen Hube. Wiesbaden: Marix, 2005. Pp 508. Bound EUR 12.95 [2005-2009]; EUR 18.00 [2010]. ISBN: 3-86539-012-9.

The surge of interest in fantasy literature of recent years also seems to have favoured novel attempts at popularizing the Old English trolls' tale *Beowulf*. The Nordic philologist Hans-Jürgen Hube's *Beowulf* edition clearly aims at popularization and is not intended as a pioneering scholarly work. The book's 35 chapters are each devoted to a block of about 100 lines of the epos. Each starts with a commentary containing mainly Hube's German prose translation of the Old English text, followed by the text itself, divided into short passages of about five lines, alternating with an old German alliterative verse translation by Hugo Gering, followed by further comments. Thus the entire *Beowulf* text is presented piece by piece, three times in all. The book closes with an epilogue and an appendix containing historical and stylistic information, genealogical and chronological tables, an index and a glossary.

Hube's commentaries, much lengthier than the actual text, exhibit overly much solicitude for the reader. Hube cannot resist the incessant italicization of words to be considered important, and stage directions abound, à la "*Lesen wir die eigentlich doch sehr elegante angelsächsische Fassung*". The commentaries contain much redundant, doubtful and confusing matter; they produce annoying disruptions of the Old English text. One wonders why the text has not been presented in a more connected fashion. But the decisive question is: Where does Hube's Old English text come from? Typographic oddities and strange readings show that none of the classic editions can be its basis. The *Beowulf* ms contained no accents (apart from a few stray apex-signs); but for over 100 years editors have added diacritic signs in the form of macrons to mark long vowels, e.g. ms *ban* 'bone' > *bān*. About 150 years ago, some editors used acute accents for the same purpose (*bán*), a practice long since abandoned. Hube's text, however, is peppered with acute accents; they seem to appear on the long vowels ("bánfatu bærnán ond on baél dóön" line 1116, "syððan aérest wearð / féasceaft funden" 6f) where *aé*, a digraph falsely signalling a diphthong, replaces the long *æ*. Strange diereses (dóön; líffréä, 16b) remain inexplicable to the reader. Could Hube have culled his text from some forgotten 19th century edition?

Improbable as it might seem, the strange forms actually go back to a *Beowulf* edition on the internet, that of the Old English specialist Benjamin M. Slade (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) on his site "Beowulf on Steorarume (Beowulf in Cyberspace)", <http://www.heorot.dk/beo-intro-de.html>. Here, from December 2002, Slade has offered his own editions of the *Beowulf* text, one diplomatic one and one critical one. Slade's critical edition appears twice, with one specimen set in parallel columns with Slade's own Modern English translation, the other set in parallel columns with the old German al-

literative verse translation by Hugo Gering which we encountered above, improved by Slade.

Examination quickly shows that Hube has copied Slade's critical edition without mentioning this fact anywhere. The preliminaries of Slade's parallel versions reveal how the unusual diacritic signs in Hube's Old English text came about: They simply represent older problems of HTML typography. Slade explains the acute accents as follows: "An accent acute (´) is used to indicate long vowels, rather than the standard macron (¯), e.g. *á* = long *a*." "The HTML standards do not currently support accented ash (*æ*): thus, long *æ* is represented by the digraph *ǽ*." The explanation of the diereses is:

"Where a diphthong (e.g. *ea*) is to be pronounced as two syllables, a [*sic*] umlaut (¨) is placed over the second vowel: thus *eö* is disyllabic." "Where a mono[ph]thongic vowel is to be 'expanded' to a disyllable (in order to fit the metre), a umlaut (¨) is placed over the vowel: thus *ö* is disyllabic." [The preliminaries to Slade's Old English-German version have the same explanations in German.]

The diereses show disyllabic readings assumed by Slade for metrical reasons; behind this is Sievers' doctrine of metrical types for the distribution of syllables in Germanic alliterative verse or, rather, disputable emendations; cf., for *liffreā*, Standop 2005:37. The forms *dóön* in 1116b, 1172b, *doön* in 1534b, *dön* in 2166b are merely unclear editorial (Slade's) variants for one and the same assumed disyllabic pronunciation of *dōn* copied by Hube.

All of Hube's diacritics are Slade's. All other conspicuous readings are also Slade's, as <eorl> (ms "eorl") 6a, <al(f)walda> 1314b (ms "alf walda"; *Alfwalda* 'ruler of elves' in Slade's Old English-Modern English version), <siþðan camp him wearð> 1261b ("him" not in the ms) instead of the traditional forms <eorl[as], *alwealda*, *siþðan Cāin wearð*> (thus Klaeber).¹

Slade based his internet edition on Kevin Kiernan's CD-ROM *Electronic Beowulf* 1999ff, which includes a digital facsimile of the ms, a diplomatic transcript and a text edition of Kiernan's own. Hube might well also have culled material from Kiernan, but the latter's edition cannot be the basis of Hube's text. Hube agrees with Kiernan only when Slade follows Kiernan. This is especially interesting in idiosyncratic readings, as in the following case. In *Beowulf* 3150b, the parchment is nearly illegible: the best present knowledge supports the reading "*Gēatisc mēowle*" (Standop 2005:121, 206ff). Older editors had read a sequence of letters "lat" or even "lat." instead of *Gēat*. They then misinterpreted a smudgy sign resembling an *m* above the next word (*meowle*) as "an", viz. an alleged Latin gloss "anus" 'old woman' and fantasized something like 'geomeowle' [erstwhile-woman] to fill the illegible space. The trace is not <an> but probably only an *m* meant to clarify the defective *m* of *meowle* immediately below it; but the misinterpretation "anus" survived for at least 80 years. The myth was exploded in 1967 by Tilman Westphalen; see his photograph and drawing of the trace, Westphalen 1967:116f, 154, and pp 152–177, and the account of Fulk 2005:202. Slade and Kiernan again interpret the *m*-trace as "an", Kiernan's amazing assertion "superscript **an** usually ignored" crowning the absurdity. Kiernan includes the in-existent "an" in the main text, reading "[*Ge*]at[*isc*] [*an*]meowle"; in his glossary he invents an Old English compound *anmeowle* otherwise unattested. Slade adopts Kiernan's form as *Gēatisc ánmēowle*; in his Modern English translation, he has "a solitary Geatish woman" sing at Beowulf's funeral pyre. No other *Beowulf* edition contains *ānmēowle*. Hube's "*Gēatisc ánmēowle*" on p 398 must be Slade's.

The impressum claims: "Newly typeset and re-edited edition... following the edition: Gering, Hugo: *Beowulf* together with the Finnsburg-fragment: translated and elucidated. Heidelberg 1906. On the basis of this edition, the Anglosaxon original text and the alliterative verse translation, re-edited by Dr. Hans-Jürgen Hube, has been typeset afresh" [in German, my transl.]. That the text has been re-set on any considerable scale is hard to believe. A comparison of lines 1 to 1049 (to the end of fit 16) in Slade and Hube results in very few differences, which exclude a real re-impression much rather than substantiate it:

1) Hube italicizes Slade's Old English text; Old English *æ* becomes Hube's *æ*, which is indistinguishable from *æ* (the passages of the German verse translation he leaves in roman). 2) Instead of Slade's inverted commas, Hube has > <, instead of Slade's double dashes single ones, sometimes lacking; he deletes Slade's spaces in front of punctuation marks. Slade underlines certain vowel signs as in 'dogores' 219, 605, 'géomōre' 151 to indicate hypermetrical syllables; Hube deletes the marks. 3) A few times a capital letter replaces the lower case letter of Slade's text. 4) After 389a words seemingly claimed by the

¹I thank Benjamin Slade for pointing the latter readings out to me.

alliteration might be missing in the ms; many editors, but not Slade, had supplied conjectural text; Hube has: “þa wið duru healle / Wulfgar eode” [*sic*, no diacritics], the addition of Grein 1857, which also some other editors have adopted (Grein’s spelling: “þâ við duru healle / Vulfgâr eode”).

None of these changes required a completely novel composition; the allegation is controverted *a fortiori* by certain printer’s errors. On p 62, line 374, the sequence “*dem Hredel*” from the German version, but in italics, has remained stuck to the Old English text after *Géata*; the respective German line in roman starting four lines lower lacks this its beginning; the mistake betrays an aborted attempt at copying the passage from Slade’s HTML-columns; almost certainly such a mishap would have been detected and eliminated had there been a real re-impression.

As his greatest deviation from Slade, Hube has “simplified” the punctuation of the Old English text. Slade follows classic editions but frequently uses a middle dot (as sometimes also occurs in the ms), explaining: “middle dot, (·), to mark off clauses—indicating a less definite pause which may vary between a modern comma and a full stop, also employed in cases of various ambiguity in the text”. In a WORD file, the middle dot is the familiar control-character for a space. That is probably why Hube deleted it from his otherwise identical text, e.g. in 89ff “þaér wæs hearpan swég / swutol sang scopes sægde sé þe cúþe” ‘there was the sound of the harp, / the sweet song of the bard. He spoke who knew’. At “sang scopes · sægde” Slade correctly indicates a syntactic caesura, Klæber and Kiernan even read a period (“scopes. Sægde”), i.e. assume the strongest possible syntactic break; the ms has <Sægde> with a capital <S>.—There is no excuse for such a bad rendering even online, let alone in print.

Hube’s German translations increase the confusion. His prose version is not literal as he claims, but an inaccurate, larded commentary (I’ll dispense with examples). He has also copied Gering’s verse translation from Slade, but with fussy changes, such as replacing Gering’s archaic, poetic *ward* by modern colloquial *wurde*. Also Hube’s German verse text is based on Gering’s first edition 1906.² Hube adopts Slade’s corrections of Gering uncredited, with minimal modifications. For example, Slade corrects Gering’s “Jüten” (OE *gēatas*) for *Gauten*, in Hube they become “Göten”. Idiosyncratically, Slade has Breca and Beowulf row and not swim in their contest in 505 to 580, and replaces Gering’s “*schwimmen*” several times with “*rudern*”. Hube adopts these changes on pp 80ff, although he himself always speaks of swimming in his prose version (pp 76ff).—Time and again readers are left to their own devices confronted with such unexplained contradictions between Hube’s German prose version and both the German alliterative translation and the Old English text.

Hube’s sparing hints at his textual basis (no preface) amount to sheer obfuscation. Hube calls Gering’s verse version a parallel translation (pp 35, 202); but Gering’s slim volume contains no Old English text at all, not even in its last issue of 1929. The Old English text on which Gering had based himself, the *Beowulf* editions of Holthausen 1905, 1912, bear no resemblance to Hube’s either.

One wonders whether Hube ever consulted Gering’s book in the first place. He might have mistaken Slade’s heading “*Beowulf-Text mit diakritischen Zeichen mit paralleler Übersetzung von Hugo Gering [1906], bearbeitet von Benjamin Slade*” to mean that also the Old English text on Slade’s site was by Gering 1906, and reproduced the Old English text without a second thought.³ In such a case one might not charge him with the intentional theft of Slade’s editorial work, but still with plagiarism, since it would be impardonable that Hube failed to ascertain the matter, nowhere revealed the direct source of his text, Slade’s internet site, and misled the reader about it by all methods. [Slade’s copyright: “All... material on this site under copyright 2002 - 2003, Benjamin Slade. Please include proper citation reference if quoting a short passage; otherwise no part of these documents may be reproduced without expressed permission from the author.”]

The book sells well enough for the price to have been raised by 50% in the present year. The question remains what value it might have, if any—on condition the publisher did acquire the lacking copy-

² On p 20, in contrast to the impressum, Hube maintains that his basic text was the “*Nachdichtung von Hugo Gering... in zweiter Auflage... 1929*” [*recte* the re-impression 1929 of the second, revised edition of 1913]; but I could find no evidence for such a procedure. In a specimen (ll. 1 to 1049), it is true, Gering’s first and second edition contained 58 different wordings; but in 28 of these Hube follows Slade 2002 (< Gering 1906) verbatim, in the 30 others he introduces changes which either do not resemble Gering’s revisions at all or would be explicable without Gering 1929 [1913].

³ Even the slight excuse inherent in such an error—if there was one—has been obsolete since September 2005, when Hube and his publisher were informed that Gering’s book contains no Old English text.

right at last. It offers no reliable text or guidance to students of English; nor do Hube's epilogue and the appended matter yield anything not found better elsewhere. True, Hube seems to envisage mainly readers interested in the tale, the historical context, and perhaps fantasy diversion; but such readers would be better served by a reprint of Gering's alliterative translation (138 pages with notes).

References Fulk, R. D. 2005. "Some contested readings in the *Beowulf* manuscript." *RES* 56: Nr 224. 192-223.—Gering, Hugo. 1906. *Beowulf nebst dem Finnsburg-Bruchstück: Übersetzt und erläutert*. Heidelberg: Winter.— Same title, 1929 [1913]. Zweite, durchgesehene Auflage, 2. Abdruck. Heidelberg: Winter.—Grein, Christian W. M. 1857. "XVI. Beowulf [sic]." *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie in kritisch bearbeiteten Texten und mit vollständigem Glossar*. Bd I, 255-341. Göttingen: Wigand.—Holthausen, Ferdinand. 1905-1906. *Beowulf nebst dem Finnsburg-Bruchstück*. Teil 1: *Texte und Namensverzeichnis*. Teil 2: *Einleitung, Glossar und Anmerkungen*. Heidelberg: Winter.—Same title, 1912. Dritte verbesserte Auflage, 2 vols. 1912. Heidelberg: Winter.—Kiernan, Kevin. 2003. *Electronic Beowulf*. Version 2.0 (2003 [cop. 1999 to 2003]), a set of 2 CD-ROMs published by British Library Publications, 96 Euston Road, London NW 1 2DB; England.—Prospectus: <http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeowulf/main.htm>. [Last checked 2010-07-06.]—Klaeber, Friedrich. 1968 [1922]. *Beowulf and the fight at Finnsburg: Edition with introduction, bibliography, notes, glossary, and appendices*. 3rd edition, with 1st and 2nd supplements. Boston, Mass: Heath. — Slade, Benjamin M. 2002-2003. *Beowulf on Steorarume (Beowulf in Cyberspace)* <http://www.heorot.dk>. [Online edition of *Beowulf*: the Old English text and a diplomatic as well as a critical edition, besides modern translations, explanatory remarks and other, supplementary matter.— Last checked 2010-07-06.]—Standop, Ewald. ed. 2005. *Beowulf: eine Textauswahl mit Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar und Glossar*. 5th ed. Berlin: de Gruyter. [Up to 4th ed., 1967, ed. Martin Lehnert.]