Summaries of Beowulf Lectures

Introduction to Beowulf, September 10, 2014

KEYWORDS: OLD ENGLISH, TRANSLATION, KINGSHIP

Most of this class was background to Old English and to the poem, but there are a few useful things to remember about Old English poetry and about Beowulf.

We talked about what it means to translate a work, in terms of language (Old English to modern English); form (verse to prose); and media (from oral performance to written text to printed text to graphic novel).

Some translations try to preserve alliteration and/or verse.

The graphic novel we are reading used a verse translation in its first edition, and a freer, prose translation for the second (our edition).

Beowulf began life as an oral poem: the opening word, Hwaet!, is an appeal/command for attention from an audience.

Alliteration is important in Old English verse: two verses (“half-lines”) are connected through the repetition of initial consonants (alliteration). Here are lines 4-8 of the opening of the poem (part of the section we discussed in class), with the alliteration marked:

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Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosela ofteah,
egsode eorlas. Syðdan ærest wearð
feasceafa funden, he þaes frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum, weordmyndum þah,
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[Oft Scyld the Sceafing from squadroned foes,
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
awing the earls. Since erst he lay
friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:
for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve]
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These lines show the typical pattern of two alliterative stresses in the first half-line, and one in the second.

Another feature of Old English is the use of compound nouns, often from the combination of two words which mean more or less the same thing; these “poetic
compounds” are useful to an alliterative poet who often needs many different words to express the same thing

“Kennings” are a particular kind of compound which refer to things metonymically or metaphorically; the use of “hron-rade” (whale-road) in Beowulf to refer to the sea is an example

The opening description of Scyld Sceing confirms that he was a good king: he subdued his enemies and earned tribute from them, and he enriched his followers. The theme of kingship is going to be important throughout Beowulf

September 15, 2014

KEYWORDS: REMEDIATION, MONOMYTH, PRIDE, FATE, INSIDE/OUTSIDE

We began the class by exploring the original Latin sense of translation as “a carrying or removing from one place to another; transplanting, ingrafting”; I connected these senses to the modern theoretical term remediation, or the representation of one medium in another

I also introduced the idea of the monomyth, Joseph Campbell’s term, from The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), to describe a fundamental structure that, he argued, could be found across cultures and time

The monomyth’s stages are

- a call to adventure
- a road of trials
- achieving the goal
- a return to the ordinary world
- application of the boon, in which the hero uses what has been gained to improve the world

I began with this quotation from Campbell: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”
We talked about whether the implications of self-knowledge and altruism which seem to be present in many of Campbell’s examples (Osiris, Prometheus, Moses, the Buddha, Christ) work in an honour/shame culture like the one that operates in *Beowulf*.

We considered the role of pride in *Beowulf*. Conventions such as Beowulf’s seeking after glory, the heroic boast, and the word-contest (with Unferth) all suggest what we might see as pride is a good thing in the world of the poem.

But it is the glory of Heorot that provokes Grendel’s rage, and the structure of the poem emphasizes how sorrow follows joy (twice, as the structure is repeated after Beowulf’s battle with Grendel).

Should Beowulf, now a king, have gone to fight the dragon?

The poem’s final praise of Beowulf says that he was “lofgeornost”: most eager for fame, honour.

This may be a place where two layers of the poem— a pre-Christian and a Christian one— interact in complicated ways.

Another such place may be in the mixing of references to fate (“wyrd”) and God: moments in the poem where we wonder about who/what is in control include:

- the burial of Scyld Scefing
- the presence of the sword in Grendel’s mother’s cave
- the prophecies concerning the future of the Geats

We talked about sympathy for Grendel and his mother. The poem places them outside the world of men: they are of the race of Cain, and they dwell in the darkness beyond the warmth of the hall. Do we understand Grendel’s rage? When Grendel’s mother seeks revenge, she is acting within what would be the normal moral economy for members of Beowulf’s society. If we feel sympathy, are we imposing an anachronistic reading, or is there something in the construction of the poem that encourages such questions?