From Old English Poetry to the Modern Novel: *Beowulf*, Writing Craft, and the Adaptation of Language

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Abstract: Using adaptation theory and my own novel, *Shield Maiden*, published in 2023 by Hachette, I examine how history of the English language (HEL) scholarship intersects with creative writing and writing craft. I've identified a large gap in our knowledge and understanding of how HEL can give us perspective and access to ancient texts and primary source materials while helping writers navigate from languages of the past to modern English. I use *Shield Maiden* as a case study for this relationship and demonstrate how to pay homage to the original text without imposing colonialist silencing over marginalized voices.

Introduction

In many ways, poetry is inextricably entwined with the history of the English language (HEL)—especially where written texts are concerned. A significant number of our most revered and memorable writings from antiquity to the present are written using poetic forms and literary devices. Many of these texts, especially those written in Old and Middle English, require translation and adaptation in order to be understood by modern English speakers, and in this article, I will discuss adaptation as a modern form of translation using my own novel, *Shield Maiden*, as a kind of case study. *Shield Maiden* is a novelized reimagining of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, in which I absolutely and unapologetically change a lot of things related to the story, characters, and action, but in which I also attempt to preserve and celebrate Old English language, practices, literary devices, and poetic identity.

Shifts from oral tradition to writing, from poetry to prose, from Old English to the English we speak today—these are all forms of both translation and adaptation that have been practiced for centuries by poets, writers, and storytellers alike. More and more, these elements of writing and translation/adaptation have become integral in writing studies curricula, connected not only to the study of craft, but also to the knowledge and understanding of HEL. For example, Mar Diaz-Millón et al. (2022) state that, "Cross-curricular competencies involve gaining cross-disciplinary skills in the teaching-learning process," (p. 83), including the "cultural adaptation and (re)creation of texts" (84). Likewise, Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh (2010) claim that adaptation is "a trope that can and should shape pedagogy," and advocate for teaching "adaptation pedagogy at different educational levels and in different disciplines," including writing (p. xi). Katja Krebs (2012) calls translation and adaptation "two sides of an ideological coin" (pp. 42-3) and states that,

> Both translation studies and adaptation studies are interdisciplinary by their very nature; both discuss the phenomena of constructing cultures through acts of rewriting; and both

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> are concerned with the collaborative nature of such acts and the subsequent and necessary critique of notions of authorship. (p. 43)

So little work in HEL studies focuses on the nuts and bolts of how to successfully portray linguistic, historical, and cultural artifacts from early historical texts; however, with the increase in novelizations, retellings, reimaginings, and adaptations of ancient documents such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, *Medea, Gilgamesh,* and *Beowulf,* it would benefit writers and readers alike to have some examination of how HEL scholarship can inform modern, interdisciplinary writing studies, in which HEL scholarship already features significantly.

In adapting the early medieval poem *Beowulf* into a modern prose novel—and pulling through those themes and issues that still occupy our social, political, and cultural consciousness today—I attempted to not only obey Fredric Jameson's (1982) "transhistorical imperative" to "always historicize!" (p. 9) my own *Beowulf* adaptation, but to approach the original text with both reverence and skepticism. Thomas Leitch (2015) claims that "history itself is a series of adaptations" (p. 7), and I argue that this also applies to history of the English language. While other critics agree, it is difficult to find extant scholarship on the relationship between creative writing and HEL scholarship. For example, Tara Williams (2012) states that,

> While I focus below on how these benefits contribute to a literature curriculum, HEL also suggests how we might bridge gaps that often exist among the subdisciplines of English (literature, rhetoric, and creative writing) and between how we practice literary studies as a scholarly discipline and how we teach literature classes. (p. 167)

Williams mentions creative writing in passing, but she never delves into it in any depth. Williams (2010) also notes that according to an Association of Departments of English survey, "creative writing was 'a close second to literature as the most popular English concentration'" and repeats that "HEL brings together elements from literature, creative writing, and rhetoric" (p. 170). My search of databases for the terms "creative writing" and "history of the English language" or "HEL" together returned only curriculum and course catalogs from institutions that offer classes in each subject, but no other evidence of collaboration between the fields. Therefore, it becomes clear that the intersection between creative writing and HEL remains a gap in the scholarship for both disciplines. This article attempts to address that gap and demonstrate the value in using the work that HEL scholars have done to talk about fictional adaptations.

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When I first constructed a story idea based on the early medieval epic poem *Beowulf*[1] fifteen years ago, I envisioned the resulting novel as a deeply poetic and literary work. I had grand plans to incorporate Old English literary formal devices and conventions into the story, turning my prosaic prose into a feast of lyric poeticism. I imagined myself the next John Gardner, and had grandiose dreams that my work would be lauded and studied and enshrined beside his *Grendel* for generations to come.

This is not, of course, the book I actually wrote.

As I churned out the first pages and sent them to my MFA professors and classmates for critiques and workshops, and as the feedback began to trickle in, I started to realize that my vision of how to adapt the Old English poem into a story for a modern audience was doomed to failure. All my meticulous research into the minutiae of early English medieval culture and language, my inclusion of kennings (hyphenated compound words), caesura (a pause in the middle of a poetic line), and alliteration (repetition of an initial consonant sound) served only to alienate my readers from the other

important elements of the novel—the story, and the characters who would live within it. I soon realized that if I wrote only for my desire to show off my knowledge of Old English language, literature, and history, I would end up being my book's only reader. I had to learn how to adapt the original poem into a readable text that would appeal to an audience that does not have a Ph.D. in medieval literature. In other words, I had to adapt not only my source material, but the way I thought, approached, and wrote about it.

I also had to answer some basic questions about my manuscript and what I wanted to achieve by adapting *Beowulf* into a modern novel. I needed a firmer goal than a simple, "I really like this poem" or "I want to get people interested in early medieval literature." It took two comprehensive drafts to identify my true purposes in writing this novel: to celebrate the language and poetics of the original poem, and to make marginalized, silenced populations visible and their voices heard. I felt it especially important now, as our leaders ramp up the rhetoric of Othering[2] to expose and explore the way systems of power attempt to silence marginalized and underrepresented voices across time and culture. I hoped my readers might reach across history and make connections between events taking place in 10th-century Scandinavia and their own modern lives—an action called presentism—and I used the history between Old English and modern English as one way to achieve this.

Obviously, I'm only one in a long history of writers to attempt this. Writers and scholars have been engaged with medievalism—"the ongoing process of recreating, reinventing, and reenacting medieval culture in postmedieval times" (Emery & Utz, 2014, p. 2)—since the 19th century. According to Emery & Utz, Leslie J. Workman has stated that, "presentism in medievalism—the fact that an individual's interpretation of the Middle Ages always reveals at least as much about that person's present concerns as about whatever the Middle Ages may have actually been" (2014, p. 4). This is an essential element of both study and use of the Middle Ages in scholarship and popular culture.

In an interview about her acclaimed novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison (2010) states that "History is written by the conquerors," a literary echo of Winston Churchill's famous claim that history is written by the victors. Morrison, in speaking about slavery and the suppression of Black voices in popular culture, describes a literary landscape in which the prevailing voices—being primarily White, male, and Christian—oppress and silence the Other, to the extent that we never get to hear their stories. *Beowulf* is guilty of this literary colonialism. In the surviving 3182 lines of the Old English poem, Beowulf fights three monsters—Grendel, Grendel's unnamed mother, and a similarly unnamed dragon—in the company of Danish and Geatish (Swedish) men. Human women in the poem are servile, gracious, largely absent from the story, and entirely absent from the action. Marilynn Desmond notes that women have been effectively erased from early medieval poetry, resulting in the erroneous assumption that "within the structures of Anglo-Saxon[3] culture women were essentially mute" (1990, p. 574). The historical record actually shows that women held positions of power and joined their male counterparts as warriors and fighters, one of the highest statuses within the clan system. Stephanie Singh (2015) of York University states that, "[I]t becomes clear that women bore a great deal of power and sway, often more than men and sometimes more than entire tribes or clans" (p. 1) during the early medieval period. Additionally, recent archaeological evidence tells us that women also participated in the prestigious warrior culture of early medieval society. One example of this erasure of feminine warrior identity within the literature and scholarship occurred when male archaeologists uncovered a number of Viking graves in 1878 and assumed the skeletal inhabitants were all men because they had been buried with weapons, armor, and, in some cases, their horses. The archaeologists did not bother to test the bones to determine their sex, confident that their assumptions of masculine warrior burials were correct. It was not until 2017 that scientists determined the bones had come from female bodies. Neil Price et al. (2019) went on to explicitly state that, "It is important to remember that when Bj.581 was recorded, male biological sex was not only conflated with a man's gendered identity, but also that warriorhood was presumed to be an

exclusively masculine pursuit" (p. 187). Likewise, there is no mention in *Beowulf* of the wealth of diverse peoples that made up early medieval society in the 7th-11th centuries, nor of the Indigenous peoples who were summarily erased by its conquest. Africans, Moors, Jews, Arabs, and people of many nationalities and heritages mingled and traded with the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, resulting in a diverse and inclusive society. Why, then, do we only hear about White male characters in this poem?

Because, as Toni Morrison pointed out, such stories are written by the conquerors, who tend to privilege their own voices.

The inspiration for *Shield Maiden* came from a desire to elevate these subsumed voices and bring to light the rich diversity and racial variance of early medieval communities. The novel focuses on the last battle of *Beowulf* and follows the story of Theow, the hapless slave who wakes the dragon that kills the titular king, and Fryda—daughter of Weohstan and sister of Wiglaf—who does not appear in the original poem at all. My book loosely follows the narrative structure of the Old English poem, but asks the reader to interrogate the veracity of stories from all sources, including the voices of power. The best way to do this, I determined, was to apply certain theories of adaptation studies to the writing of my novel, and to engage in an understanding of the history of the English language that allows for adaptation as well as translation.

Adaptation Studies

While adaptation theory is primarily applied to literary and cultural studies, there is a growing sense that adaptation has a place in creative writing scholarship as well. With the wealth of literary retellings, reimaginings, and folk and fairy tale adaptations on the fiction bookshelves these days, adaptation studies represent a rich and untapped resource for writing, writing studies, and the scholarship of writing craft.

Playwright Alfred Urhy claims that "[a]daptation is a bit like redecorating" (qtd. in Hutcheon, 2012, p. v), a statement that implies a superficial, cosmetic alteration that leaves the fundamental structure, foundation, and bones of the original work untouched and unchanged. He implies that adaptations should remain functionally mimetic of their predecessors, and any changes made should be superficial enough to preserve that recognition. Thomas Leitch (2017), however, offers a more comprehensive definition of adaptation in his book, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies:*

> As a process, adaptation often describes how one or more entities are reconfigured or adjusted through their engagement with or relationship to one or more other texts or objects. As a product, adaptation can designate the entity that results from that engagement or the synthesized result of a relationship between two or more activities. More recent definitions have offered a third perspective: adaptation as an act of reception in which the reading or viewing of that work is actively adapted as a specific form of enjoyment and understanding. (p. 23)

I appreciate Leitch's definitions for several reasons. First, despite writing the majority of his scholarship about film adaptation, Leitch here allows for other forms of adaptation that include language and written texts. This opens the door and invites writers of literature, plays, and other non-cinematic texts to participate in the field of study. Second, Leitch looks at adaptation as a much deeper act of creation than Urhy's notion of "redecorating" existing works. Texts are instead "reconfigured" and reflect the original source not through replication but through the recognition of a relationship with that material. This allows for a much broader concept of what an adaptation can be and removes the necessity for mimetic recognition. Finally, with the inclusion of the third definition, Leitch removes the limitations of adaptation to include the audience, which allows for a

much broader understanding of the creation of adaptation. Under this definition, adaptation can include such genres as spinoffs and fanfiction, which in the past have been dismissed as at best frivolous and at worst insulting to the source material. Linda Hutcheon (2012) defines this problem as prevalent in adaptation studies, for "in both academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, contemporary adaptations are most often put down as secondary, derivative" (p. 2). Hutcheon also makes the important point that, "[t]hese ways of engaging with stories do not, of course, ever take place in a vacuum. We engage in time and space, within a particular society and a general culture" (p. 25). Therefore, to produce an adaptation, a writer must forge recognizable relationships between many entities: the original text, the audience, a sense of place, a moment in time—and, I argue, it must have its own identity, purpose, and value as a text in and of itself.

Poet and scholar Michael Alexander offers yet another perspective of adaptation, one that begins with Hutcheon's premise that stories cannot exist in a vacuum, and expands to include some of the problems inherent in adaptation studies. Alexander states that adaptations are "inherently 'palmipsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly" (qtd. in Hutcheon, 2012, p. 6). This definition hints at an illicit and socially damaging relationship between a text and its adaptation. A palimpsest is a piece of parchment or vellum that has been written upon, the ink scraped off, and reused, sometimes many times. The act of obliterating the original text can be interpreted as violent, and the act of overwriting it can be seen as mimetic of a colonial takeover wherein one entity superimposes itself over another. Additionally, Alexander's invocation of incest—a perverse, taboo, criminal form of eroticism—implies a troubled and socially unacceptable relationship between the two entities, one that "haunts" and "shadows" like the ghost of a victim. Alexander's definition best incorporates the notion of the academic and social disgust aimed toward adaptations (the book is always better, right?) and reframes adaptation itself as a violent, transgressively colonial act. I felt the need to be mindful, then, when creating my own adaptation of *Beowulf*, that my novel could not also be construed as "palimpsestuous" of the original text by others. I felt that an alternate reading of *Beowulf* should not erase or overwrite the value of the original, but could instead allow a place for those ghosts that had been scraped off the vellum in previous adaptations of the text. This applies not just to the story or the culture, but also to the language and the narrative identity that makes the poem so unique and beloved.

Beowulf, for example, already has a rich history of adaptation. Kathleen Forni (2018) poses the question, "[W]hy is *Beowulf*, of all tales, continuously reinvented, rewritten, and reimagined in all Anglo-American popular culture" (p. 1)? She goes on to list some of the many genres of adaptation in which the story has appeared:

> The poem is remolded into mystery and romance, retold from various points of view (human, canine, feline), and extended to include Beowulf's and Grendel's childhoods or Wiglaf's reign. There are rock songs, operas, and board games…And in my favorite Beowulfian computer game, *Skullgirls*, Beowulf is a professional wrestler whose iconic defensive accouterment is a folding lawn chair named 'The Hurting.' (p. 1)

It is perhaps easy to roll our eyes and dismiss such texts as lowbrow or unliterary, but Chris Jones (2010) warns us that for professional scholars to ignore the poem's popular manifestations "would be as intellectually complacent and as strategically unwise as it would be easy, and would concede and confirm the marginal position of Anglo-Saxon studies within the English-speaking world" (p. 18). Jason Tondro (2015) also espouses the intellectual and scholarly value of *Beowulf* adaptations. He states that adaptations have "allowed talented individuals who have a keen personal interest in the Beowulf story to create idiosyncratic adaptations and appropriations of the original poem, almost all of which have some use in the classroom" (p. 33). Gloria Allaire (1999) discusses the importance of

intertextuality in adaptation throughout history, noting that, "[t]he rewriting process is no modern phenomenon, although the authorial intent and actual techniques of rewriting change across the centuries" (p. 2). Time, too, has a way of ushering the popular and the derivative into the canon of "literary" texts. One could argue, for example, that medieval mystery plays or *Paradise Lost* started out as little more than fanfiction of the Bible.

In light of such scholarly scrutiny on *Beowulf* adaptations specifically, and the inherent mistrust and negative perceptions of adaptations in general, I realized I needed to be mindful of examining the relationships between my novel and the original poem through a number of narrative, formal, and theoretical lenses. In order to situate marginalized voices center-stage while maintaining the source material as a recognizable entity in the story, I decided to focus on four elements of adaptation: story, language, history, and culture. These concepts overlap each other in significant ways, and they all are tools colonial powers use to control and suppress marginalized voices. Examination of the history of the English language demonstrates that these same tools can serve to counteract this marginalization, and I contend that through adaptation and adaptation studies, creative writers and scholars can shift and subvert the narrative structures of the colonial domination of language and history in literature.

Language

One of the greatest challenges I faced in writing *Shield Maiden* was how to adapt the language into a modern novel. *Beowulf* is first and foremost a poem, and I wrote the novel in prose. *Beowulf* was written in Old English; I had to change it to modern English. The vocabulary of *Beowulf* is formal and archaic; I had to translate that into something a modern reader could understand and enjoy without making my own language too anachronistic to the early medieval time and culture. When I first began writing, it seemed an impossible task, especially considering my concerns with linguistic colonialism in both the original poem and in my own novel.

Historically, language has been used as a tool of colonialism, and that was one element of colonial power I could not ignore in my own *Beowulf* adaptation. English is a perfect example of how language becomes an apparatus of imperialism. Peter Trudgill (2023) states that, "The history of linguistic anglicisation in the Western Hemisphere is a complex one, involving considerable competition between European powers for colonial possessions" (p. 77), though he is careful to note that language moves and evolves in ways that are not imperialistic as well. The early English medieval people spoke Old English, a language with primarily Germanic and Old Norse roots, though Irish missionaries brought some Latin influence with them in the 7th century. It wasn't until the Norman conquest of 1066 when William the Conqueror introduced Latinate French to England that the language took a radical shift. Suddenly, French became the privileged language of the land, mostly because it belonged to those who now held the reins of power. In fact, French became so firmly entrenched in English culture that it was not until Henry IV—born 300 years after the Battle of Hastings—that England had a king whose mother tongue was English rather than French. This mix of Germanic and French was the impetus behind the shift from Old English of the early medieval period to Middle English, which we see in texts from Chaucer, via the Anglo-Norman convergence. In 1568, a man named William Bullokar drafted the first English rules of grammar in his text, "Pamphlet for Grammar," in which he declared the Latin roots of English more elite and elevated than the Germanic elements, because Latin was the language of the church. Since then, English itself has often been used as a weapon for colonial conquests, the language imposed upon Indigenous and Native peoples across the globe. Languages change and evolve, and they often do so in response to colonial pressures and notions of social and political hierarchies.

Literature and poetry has its own established hierarchies, many built on the notion of how English has changed over the course of its lifetime. Gillian R. Overing (1990) explains that the *Beowulf* poem poses challenges in its language even outside the question of adaptation: "Old English poetry finds no space to occupy within the confines of accepted, agreed upon, or already delineated, literary borders. Its rhythms and sounds, its forms and content do not respond to ready-made interpretive strategies" (p. xi). This posed a serious problem for me, as I wished to represent the "rhythms and sounds" of Old English poetry, as well as other literary devices such as kennings, caesura, and alliteration in my novel. My modern novel must, by necessity, occupy "accepted" and "agreed upon" literary definitions if I wanted to avoid having my readers put down my book and never pick it up again. However, I also did not want to erase the text's intrinsic poetic identity. Therefore, I had to adapt the language while simultaneously reflecting the linguistic elements of the original.

Old English poetic meter flies in the face of much of our understanding of western notions of prosody. The vowels in Old English do not rhyme, as is customary in much early modern and modern English poetry, but the initial consonants do. Old English poetic lines do not adhere to metrical limitations in which each line contains the same number of feet. Old English poetry breaks in the center of the line as opposed to the end. I had to get creative.

Despite its seemingly fluid and unstructured nature, early medieval poetry uses a form of prosody known as "strong-stressed meter" or "accentual verse." The gist of this metrical form is very basic: there must be the same number of stresses on the left side of each caesura as there are on the right. There can be a different number of total syllables in various lines and clauses, but the number of strong-stressed syllables must mirror each other in each segment. For example, look at this excerpt from the poem, describing the destruction of Grendel's attack on Heorot:

/ / / /
Ða wæs on ūhtan mid ær-dæge
/ / / /
Grendles gūð-cræft gummun undyrne

(Then as dawn brightened and the day broke,
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain.)

As you can see, there are an equal number of stresses before and after the caesura in each line. I recreated this rhythm during the scenes from the dragon's point of view, because I wanted to imbue her character with a sense of ancient language and poetry. When we first meet the dragon, she hears a wounded girl suffering nearby:

> **Not** of **gold** or **silver,** [no], **nor** of **gems** or **pearls** [but] of **flesh** and **bone** and **blood.**
> **Some**thing **scared. Some**thing **hurt.**
>
> **Some**thing **hu**man.

In the first sentence, the conjunctions "no" and "but," indicated by brackets, act as caesuras that break the sentence into three clauses. The first line contains three strong-stressed syllables in each clause, indicated by the bold font, and the last line has two on each side of the caesura. I crafted this sentence to create a lilting rhythm reminiscent of early medieval poetry. In the next three sentences I employed anaphora—a repeated phrase at the beginning of multiple sentences—as well as two strong-stressed syllables to emphasize the dragon's otherworldly voice and to focus the reader's attention on important information. The early medieval *scops*—bards or storytellers—used repetition as a mnemonic, which is not an unusual technique to jog the memory for storytellers in the oral tradition. I wanted to honor those *scops* and the way they used language and literary techniques

by adapting their traditions as well as their stories, while at the same time making certain the lines read seamlessly for a modern reader. It did not matter to me whether the reader knew or recognized things like strong-stressed meter or alliteration; it simply mattered to me that they were present and creating a specific atmosphere for my characters and the story.

Alliteration is another well-used poetic device in early medieval poetry and so I used it sparingly, but with intention. In moments of high tension and suspense, according to Jane K. Cleland (2016), alliteration can promote intensity and anxiety. She states that "the perception of sound creates a daisy-chain of reactions" and goes on to explain that sound

> fires up mental, emotional, and physical responses galore. You can create similar responses in your readers by using Pavlovian conditioning…, which demonstrates that if you link a specific neutral sound with a specific outcome, over time, you'll always associate that sound with that outcome. (p. 157)

I chose alliteration for my neutral sound, and rising tension and suspense as the outcome. When the reader is relatively far out from an event causing tension, I use alliteration sparingly, but as the story moves towards moments of crisis, I create concentrated moments with a lot of it. For example, in a scene where Fryda, my heroine, must escape a shackle by breaking her hand, I spaced the alliteration widely throughout the sentences and included de-emphasized words like pronouns and adjectives:

> Her breath came in **s**hort, **s**harp gasps. **S**he **s**at there, unmoving, for a long, long time. **S**he **s**queezed her eyes **s**hut and **s**weat **s**oaked through her clothes, and **s**till **s**he could not move. Tears ran down her cheeks and **s**he could not **s**top trembling.

As you can see from the black bolded letters, I used the single letter "s" at the beginning of six words in four sentences. The red letter "h" shows the repetition of the "sh" sound in seven words. This creates both orthographic (visual) alliteration on the page, and auditory alliteration of the sibilants "s" and "sh" to the ear, which creates an alliterative repetition leading up to the moment Fryda breaks her fingers. At the moment of crisis, however, I used the alliteration only on the words I specifically want to emphasize:

> A wild, animal cry tore from her throat, but this time it could not mask the resounding *snap* of her **b**roken **b**ones as her thum**b b**urst from its housing and ground against itself.

The letter "b"—representing a bilabial stop that produces a plosive speech sound—creates an abrupt, violent noise that mimics the sound of her broken bone. By associating alliteration with increasing tension and a movement toward a cataclysmic event, I found a way to include this literary device in the "accepted" norms of modern literature. In the same vein, I used recognizable modern symbols that denote pauses, such as ellipses, conjunctions, and em-dashes, to replace caesuras, and I employed a combination of kennings from the *Beowulf* poem itself (for example, "bone-lappings" for skeletal joints) as well as some compound words of my own construction (such a "pleasure-tide" for sexual climax) to describe scenes, objects, and establish context. Kennings invoke the language of the original text, but also provide a sense of poetic imagery for the reader. My audiences may not realize they are experiencing centuries-old conventions, but they will still be affected by the way I use sound and repetition in these moments, demonstrating that literary devices can transcend time, culture, and genre. In this way, I attempted to find space for important early medieval literary traditions within "accepted" or "agreed upon" forms.

In addition to literary devices, I was also faced with the fact that the single surviving *Beowulf* manuscript was written not by the original creators of the *Beowulf* poem—who probably lived in the

6th or 7th century—but was penned by monastic scribes hundreds of years later, most likely during the reign of King Cnut from the years 1016-1035 (Neidorf, 2013, p. 249). The scribes undoubtedly revised the poem and included a great deal of language that would not have existed in the oral tradition, most specifically inclusions of Christian imagery and Biblical references. We are left, then, with something of an amalgam of early pagan and later medieval Christian language in the poem. Beowulf is, by definition, "palimpsestuous" where its language is concerned, and we see that the "shadow" of its original language "haunts" the scribes' adaptation, just as Michael Alexander posited.

I decided early in the process of writing that I wanted to represent only the original elements of the poem as much as possible, and remove all Christian language imposed by the scribes. I viewed those impositions as colonial damage to the poem, and I wanted to highlight the marginalized voices over the privileged ones. This immediately caused some major problems, because our modern English lexicon contains many Judeo-Christian references and words whose roots come from specifically Judeo-Christian ideas and texts. For example, no one in my novel could give each other a simple "goodbye," as the word is a 16th-century contraction of the phrase "God be with ye." Not only is "goodbye" anachronistic, but it's also rooted in religious culture and language. Now, it is simply not possible to write a modern novel using only language available in 6th and 7th-century English, but as I wrote this one, I had to examine the language I used—especially in dialogue—to ensure the words weren't contingent upon a religious or Biblical meaning. This made my task much more laborious, especially when a situation called for a perfectly timed "Goddamnit!" and I had to scramble to find a language-appropriate equivalent. For example, my first draft of this exchange:

> "Not going to the feast, my lady?" one [guard] asked as she drew near.
>
> The second guard peered at her. "You look fearsome pale, my lady. Are you feeling all right?" He glanced at Hild. "Should you perhaps take your lady back to her rooms?"

was originally written as:

> "Not going to the feast, my lady?" one asked as she drew near.
>
> The second guard peered at her. "You look terrible, my lady. Are you feeling okay?" He glanced at Hild. "You should probably take your lady back to her rooms."

After a little research, I found that the word "terrible" has Anglo-Norman origins, the word "okay" did not appear in English until 1839 (*OED*), and the word "probably" comes from Middle French, about four hundred years after my novel takes place, and most often referred to the Biblical notion of "having the appearance of truth" (*OED*). I scoured the novel for such words and rewrote them with more culturally appropriate phrasing that didn't carry an implicit Judeo-Christian meaning.

I also could not ignore that *Beowulf* is a translated text, which is a form of adaptation in itself. John Milton (2009) argues that there are concrete links between "Translation Studies and the new discipline of Adaptation Studies," and that "[w]e can distinguish a number of areas where translated texts are generally altered or adapted" (p. 51). However, as often happens, direct translation can be difficult, if not impossible, and translators must struggle to faithfully portray the meaning of Old English words that have no equivalent in Modern English. Therefore, I chose to keep some words untranslated and included several Old English words in my novel. In adaptation, it's important to know what to change…and what not to change. For example, the early medieval clans had elite bands of warriors called the *gedriht* and I could not find an appropriate word or term in modern English that captures the entirety of that word's meanings: "the Lord's favorite" and "the best warriors" and "the bravest" and "those with the most wealth," just to name a few. So rather than give laborious

descriptions every time I needed the word, I used the original Old English and allowed readers to garner the meaning from context. As the author of this novel, I had to be careful to not commit the very sin I spent the book arguing against. I did not want to impose my own voice too radically over the original voice of the poem. Gillian Overing had a good point when she lamented *Beowulf*'s outsider status and how difficult it is to find a place for it in contemporary poetry and literature. I was determined to allow the poem to retain its own voice in my novel and to give its language a place to be itself.

History

As a Shakespeare professor, I'm very used to authors who take liberties with history in their works. History is rife with stories written by the victors, and our perceptions of "what really happened" change as new information comes to light, and as scholars break down the biases and prejudices that inform our ideas about the past. In writing *Shield Maiden*, I knew I would come up against those biases and prejudices—in the text, in my readers, and in myself—and I had to figure out a way to either break them down or to work around them. Stephen J. Harris (2008) tells us that, "[i]n describing the past to a contemporary audience, one needs to be aware of the distorting effects of one's own convictions, concerns, and ideals" (p. 1). While this awareness is essential, authors also must be aware of the preexisting convictions, concerns, and ideals held by their audience, and one of my biggest challenges was presenting a vision of history that directly contradicted the audience's preconception about the early Middle Ages—preconceptions that exist as a result of colonial power and its definition of itself and the Other. Emery and Utz discuss this as a key element of medievalism, in which "many of the stereotypes associated with the Middle Ages—knights, taverns, witchcraft, Crusades, plague—do not always have specific historical referents; they are simply accepted in popular culture as 'medieval'" (2014, p. 2). Two examples from my experiences writing the first draft of *Shield Maiden* highlight this problem.

The first example is the epic battle I had with my first-year MFA mentor about wine. In several scenes I had my characters drinking both mead, which is a sweet liquor made from fermented honey, and wine, which early medieval people made from grapes grown in small vineyards. I had exhaustively researched what the Saxons ate and drank, and I wanted to showcase that knowledge in *Shield Maiden*. However, in his feedback on my early drafts, my professor suggested I remove all mentions of wine from the book. He argued that the audience would assume the Saxons drank only mead and that they would not believe they also drank wine. I wrote him back that I wanted to keep wine in my novel because it was a chance to expand my readers' knowledge of early medieval drinking habits. He responded that it didn't matter if it were true the Saxons drank wine if my readers refused to believe it. The inclusion of wine, he warned, would throw the reader out of the story. I sent a long response justifying why it was important to me to keep wine in my book. My professor told me in a brief, one-sentence response that John Gardner didn't include wine in *Grendel* anywhere, but had his characters drink only mead.

I capitulated and removed wine from the novel.[4]

It was a small enough detail that I felt I lost very little by removing wine from the story. I had to learn to pick my battles, and wine was not the hill I was willing to die on. The second example, on the other hand, was a different story. In my second year, I received feedback from a classmate in a workshop regarding Fryda, my main character. In my second draft, I changed the focus of my novel from Theow, the male slave, to Fryda, the daughter of the lord, and I gave Fryda the lifelong dream of being a shield maiden…a woman warrior. When my classmate read this, he commented, "I do not in any way believe that a noble woman would want to be a warrior" and expressed his skepticism of my general portrayal of women in early medieval society. "They were all basically barbarians" he wrote,

confident that his understanding of early medieval society was correct, even though he knew I had a Ph.D. in medieval and early modern literature.

I had found my hill.

Chrisopher C. Taylor (1992) claims that "[i]t is a truism of historical studies that every generation rewrites history and thus the perceived past is merely a pale reflection of the present" (p. 5). While this is an accurate statement of generational relationships with history and language, it also holds true for colonial relationships. When one culture subsumes another, it gets to choose how the outside world will perceive both the colonizer and the colonized cultures. When the Catholic scribes wrote out the literature of the pagan *scops*, they chose to represent the clans as unenlightened, violent heathens. For example, in *Beowulf* the scribes described the reason for Grendel's attacks on the Danes as a deserved punishment, for:

> Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
> Offering to idols, swore oaths
> That the killer of souls might come to their aid
> And save the people. That was their way
> Their heathenish hope… (Heaney, 2001, pp. 175-179)

With such representation, there can be little wonder that the notion of the "heathenish" barbarian persists to this day. People are often surprised to learn that the Saxons actually had a sophisticated civilization with a comprehensive set of laws, a rich literary and musical culture, and thriving trade relationships with a multitude of nations. However, the story people believe is the one put forth by their oppressors.

My difficulty, then, became how to faithfully represent the portrait of a people that my readers would not reject as false and fabricated. How could I make my audience believe that the Saxons drank wine and that shield maidens were a real thing? I asked this question at a panel for debut historical authors at the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) conference in 2020 and learned that I was not alone in this conundrum. One author suggested writing a comprehensive "Author's Note" at the end explaining my qualifications and research methods. Another panelist brushed that off and basically said that "readers can deal with it" if they aren't willing to learn new facts and ideas. Yet another agreed with my professor and advised removing unnecessary details that will bog down a reader. In other words, my question had no definitive answer, and therefore I'm uncertain whether I was able to solve the problem, though I tried. My strategy was to emphasize the fictional aspect of the story while maintaining strict internal and linguistic continuity. After all, I'm asking my readers to suspend their belief enough to accept the existence of magic and dragons…surely they can deal with wine and women warriors as well.

Ultimately, I chose to eliminate language and details that had little or no cultural significance and keep those elements that contribute to the knowledge and understanding of early medieval British culture. I attempted to highlight aspects of everyday life in an early medieval village and portray a number of different professions, institutions, governmental organizations, legal practices, and social norms. Historians and archaeologists have given us significant insights that have expanded our knowledge and understanding of early medieval life, and I considered my novel a perfect vehicle with which to demonstrate some cultural truths—specifically, the role of women, the importance of warriors, and the plight of the exile.

Conclusion

I previously brought up Kathleen Forni's bewildered question about why the *Beowulf* poem continues to be such a popular subject for modern adaptations. As I have shown here, the text deals with questions and issues that still concern us, especially regarding power, who wields it, and who is subject to its abuses. It also demonstrates the relationship between power and language—a topic integral to the study of HEL and writing courses across the curriculum. The practice of adaptation offers a rich opportunity to delve beneath the established voices and bring out the stories of oppressed and marginalized communities. It asks us to rethink our assumptions, reprioritize our perceptions, and question the validity of voices invested in maintaining the status quo. It creates space for ancient poetry and literature within accepted norms of modern literature, and helps us as fiction writers to know what elements of the source text to keep and what we can change. It makes us aware of assumptions and preconceptions our readers potentially hold, and allows us to focus on our own fictional inventions while maintaining linguistic continuity with the original text. *Beowulf* is an extraordinary story on its own, but it contains a multitude of unheard stories within it, and this, I think, is the answer to Forni's question. We continue to adapt the poem, to peel back its layers of colonial interference and suppression, to release and elevate those voices that are as much a part of our history, culture, and heritage as those of the heroes.

In writing *Shield Maiden*, I attempted to apply Thomas Leitch's notion of adaptation by "reconfiguring" the original *Beowulf* text to reveal voices hidden and overwritten by systems of power and establishing recognizable relationships between the original early medieval text and the modern reading audience. I learned that a too-strict adherence to the source material results in an artificial and difficult to read adaptation, and that elements of the original text can be preserved in ways that both celebrate the work of the original artists and make it palatable for a 21st-century reader. I learned that creating an adaptation requires compromise, both with yourself-as-author and the material, and that the purpose of an adaptation should perhaps not be simply to demonstrate an author's knowledge, but to get to the heart of a text and reveal it. And finally, I learned that applying pedagogical strategies from HEL scholarship and curriculum to creative writing and adaptation studies can help bridge the gap between the varied modes of English from ancient to the modern day. As such, a piece of literature can have as many hearts—and as many adaptations—as it has readers.

I think I discovered an answer to Kathleen Forni's question of "[W]hy is *Beowulf*, of all tales, continuously reinvented, rewritten, and reimagined in all Anglo-American popular culture?" It is because *Beowulf*, of all tales, continues to capture our imagination, tap into our need for adventure and story, but also because we can recognize our own colonial story within it and by examining it in the realm of fiction, we can learn to recognize it and grapple with the questions it raises in our current lived reality.

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Notes

[1] All quotes in this article come from Seamus Heaney's 2001 translation of *Beowulf* from W.W. Norton & Company.

[2] See, for example, Jennifer Mercieca's (2020) *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump* and *Strangers, Aliens, Foreigners: The Politics of Othering from Migrants to Corporations* edited by Marissa Sonis-Bell, David E. Bell, and Michelle Ryan (2018).

[3] Anglo-Saxon has become a contested phrase in recent years. There has been much debate amongst scholars about different uses and meanings of this term, as evidenced in Schmid's (2020) "Battling for Semantic Territory Across Social Networks: The Case of Anglo-Saxon on Twitter" and Turling's (2020) "What's in a Name: Reflections on the Anglo-Saxon Debate." Some scholars contend that the term has become irrevocably tainted by the appropriation of Anglo-Saxon by White supremacist groups (see the scholarship on this by Mary Rambaran-Olm and Erik Wade) while others, such as historian Tom Holland, make a case for disparate significations of the term between the United States and the United Kingdom (see Michael McComb's (2022) "Historian Tom Holland's Passionate Defense of the term Anglo-Saxon"). As such, I will only use this term when it appears in quotations from references, as I prefer to err on the side of caution in this case.

[4] As a very small act of rebellion, I left in one reference to wine in a very minor scene.

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