Creative Translation and Old English Poetry:  
A Report on a Teaching Technique

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This contribution takes the form of a short report on a classroom technique for teaching Old English poetry which Dr Helen Brookman (Kings College, London) and Dr Liv Robinson (Brasenose College, University of Oxford) have recently developed, trialled and evaluated.[1] As tutors, we were interested in the role and effects of the translation – particularly translating medieval texts into modern English – which we, as medievalists, often ask our students to do; and the impacts which that translation can have on their learning. In 2014, we designed and implemented a research project to investigate the role that what we termed “creative translation” could play in teaching Old English literature, using Dr Robinson’s then-first-year undergraduate English students at Brasenose College, Oxford, as student participants. In many colleges at Oxford, Old English is a compulsory part of the first year of the degree course in English, and students are required, in an end-of-year exam, to comment closely on a passage of Old English poetry in the original language, discussing not just its content, but also its distinctive literary and poetic form—so, for example, its use of four-stress alliterative lines and formulaic words and expressions, as well as characteristic techniques such as variation, compound words, and kennings. The requirements of this kind of assessment mean that the Old English poetry cannot, or at least cannot only be studied in modern English translation – we have to teach our first-year students the basics of Old English grammar and syntax, and basic techniques for using a glossary, and thus equip them (ideally) to undertake translations and close reading of the set Old English verse themselves. Students are expected to translate the set of poems in their own time, as literally as possible (i.e., making sure that they understand each word, and the relationships between the words in a sentence); class time is used for examining particular passages of poetry
in detail, and discussing their poetic features as a group. In our experience, students habitually find Old English very challenging; there are usually fluctuating levels of grammatical knowledge and experience of learning languages within any given group, and the vast majority of students are entirely unfamiliar with the more complex grammatical knowledge that is needed to understand Old English (for example, what a case system is, and how it can affect syntax and word-formation). Learning basic grammar is thus a prerequisite if students are to be able to read and understand Old English for themselves, as the assessment demands; however, all too often, this need to begin with grammar leads students to find Old English rather off-putting and esoteric. Some never wholly shake off the impression that Old English is all about grammar and not really about literature; fairly uniformly, they find discussing Old English verse as poetry extremely difficult at the start of the year, and this problem persists for some right up until the end of the course.

We were interested in finding out whether asking students to do a different kind of translation from the class preparation they usually did would help them to see the texts as poetry to be enjoyed and analysed like any other piece of literature. We decided to ask the students to undertake what we called a “creative translation:” to produce their own piece of poetry or other creative work which responded meaningfully in some way to a short piece of Old English verse, and to come to class prepared to articulate how they felt that it did so. We differentiated this task from the more “word-for-word”, extremely accurate kind of translation which they were usually asked to undertake for class, and which, for the purposes of this exercise, we called “literal translation.” To prepare them for their creative translation task, we designed and delivered a class in which the students discussed some critical writing on translating Old English poetry and together analysed a recent poetic translation of an Old English poem with which they were familiar. After this preparatory class, the creative translation assignment was set. We used the Old English poem The Ruin, which we split into small sections for translation; each student was given a different section. The students then brought their own creative translations to our next class, and discussed them in pairs, explaining the reasons for their creative choices, and offering feedback on their partners’ work. During these paired discussions, the students could experiment with redrafting parts of their creative work. Then each student presented her or his translation to the whole group, one at a time, and we recorded each one on the whiteboard, forming a composite translated poem. The students were led in these activities by a group of second-year English students, who had taken the Old English course the year
before and subsequently elected to specialise in medieval literature; these peer teachers supported the students in presenting their own creative work to each other and to the class, and offered feedback and encouragement throughout the process.

By undertaking this exercise, we hoped to allow the first-year students to identify and “inhabit” some of the distinctive features and themes of Old English poetry – and in doing so, we hoped that they would become more sensitized to their presence in the Old English texts we were studying, more able to reflect on their poetic and aesthetic effects, and more engaged and motivated in their study of Old English. Dr. Robinson led the class, while Dr. Brookman observed and took notes; she then conducted recorded interviews with the students about their experiences. These, together with the translations the students actually produced, formed the basis of our data for analysis. We undertook this analysis by close-reading our students’ interview transcripts with a particular focus on the kinds of metaphors they used about the different translation processes, literal and creative, which they had undertaken in their study of Old English. We then read the ways in which they discussed their creative translations in the observed class alongside the actual creative output which they produced: their composite version of The Ruin, which the group chose to title The Mourning After the Empire Before. Our analysis of this classroom technique and its effects for these students suggests that there were several areas in which they benefited from undertaking the task, and developed their understanding as a result of it.

Bridging the gap between student and Old English Poem

The first observation which our data confirmed was that, as learners, our undergraduate group did indeed experience real difficulty in accessing the literariness of Old English poetry, and in approaching it as literature in a meaningful way. Their usual, literal translation activities appeared to reinforce this difficulty Despite being designed to give students as good a grasp as possible of the workings of Old English language and poetics, so as to equip them for effective and sensitive close reading of Old English verse, producing literal translations at times actively worked against students’ sense that they were reading poetry. Undertaking creative translation, however, disrupted this pattern: students began to look for, and to see, poetic artistry and literary sophistication which they could enjoy and investigate where they had previously seen only verbs, nouns and inflections. One student, in his interview, described the Old English poem as an “archaic thing” – a description which suggests extreme age, and also a sense that he is unable to identify it as a poem: conceptually speaking, it was not even a text for him; rather, it was
something completely unrecognizable, a “thing.” When discussing the usual way he translated this “archaic thing” literally, he persistently used a metaphorical field relating to science, mathematical problem-solving such as Sudoku and jigsaw puzzles to talk about his experiences; this kind of metaphor was also employed by some of the other students. These metaphors suggest, broadly, a process involving the correct re-assembling of dis-assembled parts: a challenge which focuses on ‘slotting together’ words in order to get to a right answer.

When asked about doing creative translation, however, this metaphorical field changed radically: the students talked instead about finding multiple pathways into a text, about possibilities for imagining what might be happening, about using your imagination to inform your reading. They discussed creative translation as a way of opening up or revealing the Old English poem, and also explored the idea of opening oneself up to the poem through creatively translating it, in order to engage the better with it. Creative translations were not described as the result of the student’s objectively or scientifically slotting in different pieces of a puzzle to arrive at an acceptable answer, as literal translations were; rather, creative translation was conceptualised as an experience which involved engaging with the full range of interpretative and imaginative possibilities offered by the poem. In this sense, creative translation appeared to help the students to approach Old English poems as multifaceted literary works, with a core imaginative and creative element. It thus helped to increase students’ general engagement with and interest in Old English texts as literature. Indeed, one student evoked a strong sense of a new aesthetic, even emotional, connection which he now felt to the Old English material, having translated it creatively, noting specifically in his interview that “I took a lot from that poetically, in a way I haven’t actually done with Old English yet” (our emphasis). This admission that Old English had not resonated with him poetically before – perhaps even that he hitherto has not seen it as poetry – demonstrates clearly the potential of creative translation activities to overturn students’ experiences of Old English as remote and rule-based, and to allow them to develop a closer emotional and aesthetic connection to the material.

Developing familiarity with Old English poetic techniques

In addition to developing student sensitivity to Old English verse as literature, we found that the creative translation task allowed students to acquire more focused and targeted knowledge in the specific domain of Old English poetics. For example, several of the students, when presenting their translations in the paired discussions, spoke about how they wanted their work to sound like Old English. When faced with complete creative freedom to do whatever they wished within
their translation, they began to value the very particular (and, to students accustomed to more contemporary poetic forms, very unusual) rhythmic qualities of Old English poetry: its four-stress metre and its alliteration. In order to make their translations reflect these aural qualities they had to give some thought to what Old English sounds like and why: they had, to an extent, to put themselves in the position of an Old English scop, focusing on finding or creating words which made semantic and syntactic sense in context, but which also slotted themselves into a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, and alliterated regularly on stressed syllables within that pattern. The students’ paired discussions had made clear that the majority had decided early on to pursue this aim, and had had to work hard to achieve it, carefully considering a range of ways of expressing what they wanted to say, in order to find one which worked metrically and alliteratively. Inhabiting this particular feature of Old English verse caused them to realise that poets needed a wide variety of poetic vocabulary available to them in order to be able to write meaningfully within strict alliterative patterns. This was a realisation which perhaps helped to make sense of the proliferation of Old English poetic terms and possible compounds for oft-repeated, core concepts such as “man” or “warrior”, “lord” or “horse”: something which students, when beginning Old English and having to look most words up in a glossary, can find both disorientating and very frustrating. It also had further implications for their approach to another key feature of Old English verse: compound words.

Students began to recognise through practical experience that compound words can form a way of dealing with the requirement to balance semantic sense with alliterative restrictions. Several showed both inventiveness and sensitivity to tone in creating and using their own compound words within their translations. For example, the student who was translating the opening lines of The Ruin, in which the partially-destroyed buildings are described, created an image of the city’s “gates” as “gap-toothed.” In this way, she conveyed a moving sense of the desolation of the ruined buildings through the metaphor of a decomposing, ageing or incomplete human body, obliquely evoking the destructive effect of time on the lives of the humans who had once inhabited this ruined space. A second student, who was translating the section of the poem in which the poet imagines the revelry of the former inhabitants of the city, picked up on the homosocial tone in which this revelry is described in the Old English[7] and re-imagined it with a very contemporary twist, describing how “long ago/Legions of men glowed… /Glorious and brazen in the brilliance of their beer-jackets.” The initial discussion which this student had with his peers about the term “beer-jacket” – a very colloquial, British English compound noun
denoting the way in which getting drunk causes one to feel insulated from the cold – was very revealing. The student had decided that the atmosphere of his extract was, in his own words, “lads in” – it was about the fun of looking back through a hangover on a boys-only night out drinking. This is an obvious interpretative response to the “beorn monig” (many a man) who are “wlonc ond wingal” (proud and wine-flushed) in his extract from The Ruin, a response which uses his own cultural and social experiences and identity as a way of conceptualising what he sees happening in the Old English text. In part, using a very colloquial word like “beer-jacket” in his translation was a way of getting this tone of fun and friendship across. But this student was also worried – was a slang term like “beer-jacket” too much of an “imposition” on the Old English poem? Had he gone too far with a piece of “serious” Old English literature?

The discussion which followed showed the students really having to reflect on the broad implications of precise lexical choices in translation, weighing up the different responsibilities a translator has – do they convey the exact word, or the sense, and which is the “better” translation? Should a translation change its source text, and if so how much? Why might it feel like a betrayal or an inappropriate action to use a term like “beer-jacket” when translating an Old English poem? Is this feeling critically justifiable? In paired discussion, this student and his partner (helped by their second-year peer-teacher) ended up building a strong case for the ways in which the slang term “beer-jacket” actually could creatively bring to life the homosocial atmosphere of this section of The Ruin, while simultaneously making a contribution, in a formal sense, to the building of a poetic style and sound which preserved something of the Old English text’s distinctive metrical and linguistic features (in this case, contributing to an alliterative metrical scheme, and forming a compound noun like those found in Old English poetry).

Developing the complexity of students’ approaches to translation as a discipline, the class discussions provided intriguing evidence that undertaking creative translation led to a conceptual turning point for the group, not just in terms of the ways in which it enabled them to enhance their understanding of Old English poetry and the ways in which it is constructed, but also in terms of their approaches to translation as a critical discipline. In our preparatory class on Deor, the students as a group were on the whole rather suspicious of the value of translation as a creative activity. Although they did acknowledge that translations can and do change source texts profoundly, and that translations therefore exist in tension with their sources, the group almost uniformly conceptualised this change as negative or detrimental, something which damaged an original or took away from it, and was inevitably inferior to it. This determination was borne out
in the final part of the class when they were asked to discuss Simon Armitage’s *Deor* as a specific example: not a single student found anything they thought was positive or interesting to discuss about this translation; almost every element to which the tutor drew their attention was compared negatively to the Old English poem. The students’ interpretation of the features that they noticed oscillated between a sense that Armitage had betrayed or damaged aspects of the Old English text, and a sense that the Old English poem itself was in any case too unsophisticated to give rise to praiseworthy contemporary poetry. So, Armitage’s choice of the term “soul-mate” to translate the Old English “gesiþþe” (companion) was seen as wildly inappropriate when translating an Old English poem, but his decision to translate using a four-stress alliterative metre very like that of Old English verse was not popular either.[9] Indeed, one student dismissively described Armitage’s *Deor* as sounding “like a nursery rhyme,” a judgement which seemed to suggest both a sense of banal formal repetitiveness and extreme simplicity of tone and content. A firm group consensus swiftly developed that he should have used a more “modern” – and, by implication, more sophisticated – poetic form. This conservatism towards poetic translation was an attitude which was reflected in part in the interviews we conducted with the group: one student, for example, was very insistent on the superior value of traditional kinds of literary engagement, and felt that translation should not supplant these (or, implicitly, supplant study of the original texts) within the English literature syllabus as a scholarly exercise. This was the same student as the one who had decided to use the term “beer-jackets” in his translation – and, as we have seen, a very similar concern about imposition and the appropriateness of using this term also came through in his discussion of his translation with his peers. It was only after he had received encouragement and approval from his peers, peer-teachers and the tutor that he was willing to take ownership of “beer-jacket” and use it, despite its real appropriateness for the kind of things he wanted his translation to communicate. The process by which he worked through this, and the concerns which he felt about his conflicting desire to use this word, but also to remain in the realm of what he thought was an appropriate way to translate an Old English poem illustrate the way in which being put in the position of a literary *translator* caused students to perceive the creative and interpretative potential of translation differently. In the same way that reproducing the sounds of Old English poetry seems to have provided students with a greater awareness of some of the formal features of that poetry, having to produce a piece of creative translation prompted students to understand the complex choices which translators must make more fully, from the *inside*. Indeed,
undertaking creative translation seems to have materially altered the students’ sense of how sophisticated and intricate certain formal features can be: despite the fact that they had roundly critiqued Armitage’s use of a four-stress alliterative line in his Deor-translation, when they came to write their own translations, two thirds of the group in fact opted to do the same, and pointed to this very feature as one of the distinctive things they most valued about Old English poetry.

The small-group discussions in particular provided a very helpful place for the students to articulate, interrogate and re-examine their concerns about translation as an art form. One began the discussion of his translation by focusing on what he felt was lost from his extract in his translation. When the peer teacher asked him to think, conversely, about what was gained as well, though, he began to do so, and the group then had an interesting discussion about the effect of changing particular words within his translation, posing questions such as “Shall we think of a different way to say that? What would be the effect if we changed that word? Would it be interesting to change that?” In the course of the discussion, the students moved from a position where they saw translation simply as a loss, to one where they could also appreciate that it involves a gain, and think about what is brought to a translation by different creative choices.

Nonetheless, at the end of their small-group discussions, some students still called on the expertise of their second-year peer-teachers to help them evaluate how accurate their translations had been. They asked the peer-teachers to tell them what the real sense of The Ruin actually was, clearly with the aim of comparing their own work to accepted or standard ideas about the poem’s real signification, and thus (implicitly) the right way to translate it. They seemed to have been searching for the established scholarly and academically-sanctioned interpretation of the poem from their seniors, the second-year students, who they knew had access to this knowledge, having studied Old English the year before. Interestingly, the second years did not enlighten them; rather, they turned the question on its head, and asked the first years if they thought their translations had created a new sense for the poem, and what that was. The first years responded positively to this question, discussing how they thought their translations compared to each other, how they could be fitted together, and what that new poem would be about. This discussion continued when we talked about titling the whole composite poem, and the group came up with the title The Mourning After the Empire Before. This punning title reflected the range of interpretative lenses which the students had brought to The Ruin through their individual translations: the feeling of mourning a lost empire, of awe at the destructive power of time and the power of the natural world, and of re-living the vivid emotions and experiences of a night out
on the tiles (i.e., partying) through a hangover. Both elements of the task – writing their own creative translations, and discussing them with their peers in small groups – helped the first years to think far more flexibly about how their translations brought different meanings to the poem, rather than how they now should measure what they did (and, by implication, what other, published translations, both of Old English and of other texts, do) in the light of a pre-existent and rigidly determined sense of right and wrong, accurate and inaccurate, original and imposition.

Appendix 1: The Students’ Poem, A Creative Translation of *The Ruin*

The Mourning After the Empire Before

[Student 1]

But look, this stone remains—though time
has run laughing through this city
and blown down what giants built up.
The roofs are fallen in and
the towers are fallen in.
There is frost on the walls
which were built to keep out winter
and the gates are gap-toothed.
These are the bones of the city
and time has picked them.

[Student 2]
Earth-grip holds
The great creators departed, deserted
And the hard-gripping hell
Until a hundred great-grandfathers and their woe-wailing kin
Go deep below the ground
Rotting away, the earth succumbs to ruin.

[Student 3]
The ruin had fallen
Broken and demolished into mounds of rock.
There, long ago, legions of men glowed,
Gold-bright, and adorned the stone,
glorious and brazen
In the brilliance of their beer-jackets.

[Student 4]
The stream surged – stoneworks stood
Walling all hot, warbling water
Where the glinting heart once gurgled.
We discuss here our experiences with teaching Old English; we completed a second stage of research using a similar technique with fourteenth-century Middle English alliterative poetry, which we plan to evaluate in due course. A fuller account of our findings in relation to Old English than we are able to give here will shortly be published; see Helen Brookman and Olivia Robinson, ‘Creativity, Translation and Teaching Old English Poetry’, *Translation and Literature* 25:3 (forthcoming November 2016).


We encouraged students to “be as creative as you like” in their translations; in the end, all produced a piece of written poetry rather than (say) a song, some music or a piece of visual art.


For *The Ruin*, see *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Record* version online at: [http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/aspr/a3.33.html](http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/aspr/a3.33.html), accessed 11 February 2016.

‘…þær iu beorn monig / glædmod ond goldbeorht…/ wlonc ond wingal     wighyrstum scan’, *Ruin* ll. 32b-34 (*there, long ago, many a man, happy in mind and gold-bright… proud and wine-flushed in battle-garments shone.*)


See, for an example, ll. 1-2 of Armitage’s *Deor*: ‘Weland the goldsmith knew grief’s weight. / That strong-minded man was no stranger to misery,’

For the full text of the students’ poem, see Appendix 1.