In the nineteen-twenties, there were probably few people better qualified to translate “Beowulf” than J. R. R. (John Ronald Reuel) Tolkien. He had learned Old English and started reading the poem at an early age. He loved “Beowulf” and would declaim passages of it to the private literary club that he had founded with his schoolmates. “Hwæt!” (“Lo!”) he would begin. (He did the same, later, as a professor, at the beginning of Old English classes. Some of the students thought “Hwæt!” meant “Quiet!”) He also loved stories, especially medieval ones, with lots of wayfaring and dragon-slaying—activities prominent in his books “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings.” In 1920, he began teaching Old English at the University of Leeds. He needed money—by now he had a wife and children—and he supplemented his income by marking examination papers.

Anyone could have told him that he should translate “Beowulf.” How this would have advanced his reputation! Finally, he sat down and did it. He finished the translation in 1926, at the age of thirty-four. Then he put it in a drawer and never published it. Now, forty years after his death, his son Christopher has brought it out (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). It is a thrill.
serpent.” That’s the end of the dragon—the Geatish knights unceremoniously dump the body over a cliff—but it’s also the end of Beowulf. Wiglaf unclasps the King’s helmet, and bathes his wounds, to no avail. In the final lines of the poem, we see the knights, in tears, riding their horses in a circle around Beowulf’s tomb. “Thus bemoaned the Geatish folk their master’s fall, comrades of his hearth, crying that he was ever of the kings of earth of men most generous and to men most gracious, to his people most tender and for praise most eager.”

Tolkien may have put away his translation of “Beowulf” but about a decade later he published a paper that many people regard as not just the finest essay on the poem but one of the finest essays on English literature. This is “‘Beowulf’: The Monsters and the Critics.” Tolkien preferred the monsters to the critics. In his view, the meaning of the poem had been ignored in favor of archeological and philological study. How much of “Beowulf” was fact, and how much fancy? What was its relationship to recent archeological finds?

Tolkien saw all this as an evasion of the poem’s true subject: death, defeat, which come not only to Beowulf but to his kingdom, and every kingdom. Many critics, Tolkien says, consider “Beowulf” to be something of a mess, artistically—for example, in its mixing of pagan with Christian ideas. But the narrator of “Beowulf” repeatedly says that, like the minstrels who entertain the knights, he is telling a tale from the old days. “I have heard,” he says. “I have learned.” Tolkien claims that the events of the poem, insofar as they are real, occurred in about 500 A.D. But the poet was a man of the new days, when the British Isles were being converted to Christianity. It didn’t happen overnight. And so, while he tells how God girded the earth with the seas, and hung the sun in the sky, he again and again reverts to pagan values. None of the people in the poem care anything about modesty, simplicity (they adore treasure, they count it up), or humility (they boast of their valorous deeds). And death is regarded as final. No one, including Beowulf, is said to be going on to a better place.
created the treasure that becomes the dragon’s hoard; the times-less-past (there are several), in which we are told of the greatness and the downfall of legendary kings and heroes; the time-present, in which Beowulf kills the monsters; the time-future, when other peoples, hearing of Beowulf’s death, will make bold to move against the Geats, and will conquer them, pressing them into slavery. Geatish maidens scream as they imagine it. They know that it will come to pass. This is like something out of “The Trojan Women.”

As the time planes collide, spoilers proliferate. When Beowulf goes to meet the dragon, the poet tells us fully four times that the hero is going to die. As in Greek tragedy, the audience for the poem knew the ending. It knew the middle, too, which is a good thing, since the events of Beowulf’s fifty-year reign are barely mentioned until the dragon appears. This bothered many early commentators. It did not bother Tolkien. The three fights were enough.

Beowulf, Tolkien writes in his essay, was just a man:

*And that for him and many is sufficient tragedy. It is not an irritating accident that the tone of the poem is so high and its theme so low. It is the theme in its deadly seriousness that begets the dignity of tone:* *lif is here: eal sacced leobt and lif somed (life is transitory: light and life together hasten away).* So deadly and ineluctable is the underlying thought, that those who in the circle of light, within the besieged hall, are absorbed in work or talk and do not look to the battlements, either do not regard it or recoil. Death comes to the feast.

According to Tolkien, “Beowulf” was not an epic or a heroic lay, which might need narrative thrust. It was just a poem—an elegy. Light and life hasten away.

Few people—indeed, few literary scholars—can read “Beowulf” in the original Old English. Most of them can barely refer to it. The characters in the Iliad and the Odyssey, poems that were written down more than a millennium before “Beowulf,” are known even to people who haven’t read their source. Achilles, Hector: in some parts of the world, babies are given these names. But people do not know the names of the characters in “Beowulf,” and, if they did, they still wouldn’t know how to pronounce them: Heorowead, Ecgtheow, Daeghrefn. That is because Old English, as the standard language of the Anglo-Saxons, preceded the Norman invasion, in 1066, when the French,
and their Latinate language, conquered England. Here are the lines, at the
opening of “Beowulf,” that Tolkien used to shout out to his literary club:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnön,
hū ṛæælingas ellen fremedon.

This sounds more like German than like English. If you don’t know German, it
doesn’t sound like anything at all.

Old English did not become an object of academic study until the mid-
nineteenth century, and by that time there was little chance of its being
included, with Greek and Latin, as a requirement in university curricula. Also,
little of the surviving Old English literature is artistically comparable to what
Greece and Rome produced. In consequence, it was treated as a sidelong matter.
In Tolkien’s time, Oxford required that students specializing in English
literature know the language well enough to be able to read, and translate from,
the first half of “Beowulf.” That is why Tolkien had a job: at Oxford, for
decades, he taught the first half of “Beowulf.”

Then, there were the conventions of Old English poetry. “Beowulf” does not
rhyme at the ends of its lines, and it doesn’t have a rhythm as regular as, say,
Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter. Instead, each line has a caesura, or a division
in the middle, and the two halves of the line are linked by alliteration. (Look at
the opening line that Tolkien recited to his literary club: “Hwæt wē Gār-Dena
in geār-dagum.”) The pattern of the consonants creates the stresses, and thereby
the rhythm.

What is the modern translator to
do with this? It is hard, in
discussing Tolkien’s translation, not
to compare it with Seamus
Heaney’s famous 2000 version.
Heaney was a poet by trade—indeed, a Nobel laureate in literature—and to him it would probably have been unthinkable to translate “Beowulf” as anything but verse. He also chose to obey the “Beowulf” poet's prosody: the caesura, the alliteration. As for tone, he says that the language of “Beowulf” reminded him of his family's native Gaelic: solemn, “big voiced.” This magniloquence, it seems to me, is the leading edge, linguistically, of Heaney's poem. It is an Irish-sounding translation,

and he wanted it that way.

To achieve all this, he had to make some compromises. Consider the lines where Tolkien shows us Grendel eating a knight. The monster seizes the man, “biting the bone-joints, drinking blood from veins, great gobbits gorging down. Quickly he took all of that lifeless thing to be his food, even feet and hands.” In Heaney's translation, the monster, picking up the knight,

> bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body utterly lifeless, eaten up hand and foot.

Here, for the sake of alliteration and rhythm, we lose, among other things, the great gobbits (what a phrase!), the idea of using a man as food, and, most unfortunately, the picture of Grendel eating the feet and hands. Heaney’s “hand and foot” seems to mean just that Grendel went from the top of the man to the bottom. We don't have to imagine, as we do in Tolkien's translation, the monster crunching on the little bones and the cartilage—harder to swallow, no doubt.
Why did Tolkien never publish his “Beowulf”? It could be said that he didn’t have the time. As he was finishing his translation, he got the appointment at Oxford and had to move his family. Such a disruption can put a writer off his feed. A few years later, he began “The Hobbit,” which, with its three sequels, in “The Lord of the Rings,” took up many of his remaining healthy years. It has also been argued, by Tolkien’s very sympathetic biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, that he was too much of a perfectionist to let the poem go. Christopher Tolkien, in the introduction to “Beowulf,” says that, in editing, the typescript he worked from—and this was a “clean” copy, a retyping of preceding marked-up copies—was full of changes, plus marginal notes as to other, possible changes. Christopher also supplies a commentary consisting of Tolkien’s lectures on “Beowulf” and the notes he wrote to himself before and after the lectures. This material, which Christopher says he cut substantially, is longer than the poem: two hundred and seventeen pages, as opposed to ninety-three. So although Tolkien told his publisher in 1926 that he had finished the translation, he went on fiddling with it for a long time. When he published “The Hobbit,” in 1937, a number of his colleagues said to him, “Now we know what you have been doing all these years!” But he wasn’t just writing “The Hobbit.” He hadn’t stopped working on “Beowulf.”

Was this really due primarily to perfectionism? “Beowulf” was by no means Tolkien’s only translation from Old English, and he gave a number of them, such as “Pearl” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” the same treatment that he gave “Beowulf.” Both “Pearl” and “Sir Gawain” were actually set in print, but Tolkien could not bring himself to write the introductions, and so the contracts lapsed. Nor should it be thought that Tolkien’s problem was that he feared criticism from other scholars of Old English. “The Hobbit,” too, though it was not an academic enterprise, was laid aside for years, until a representative of the publisher George Allen & Unwin went to Oxford to see Tolkien, borrowed the typescript, read it, and prevailed upon him to complete it.

Another possible explanation for Tolkien’s putting “Beowulf” aside—a theory that has been advanced in the case of many unpublished manuscripts—is that the work was so important to him that if he finished it his life, or the life of his
mind, would be over. I think this makes some sense. “Beowulf” was Tolkien’s
lodestar. Everything he did led up to or away from it. This idea suggests
another. Tolkien was a serious philologist from the time he was a child. He
and his cousin Mary had a private language, Nevbosh, and wrote limericks in it.
One of their efforts went:

Dar fys ma vel gom co palt “Hoc
Pys go iskili far maino woc?
Pso si go fys do roc de
Do cat ym maino bocte
De volt fact soc ma taimful gyroc!”

(“There was an old man who said ‘How / Can I possibly carry my cow? / For if
I were to ask it / To get in my basket / It would make such a terrible row!’”) Later, he made up a private alphabet, and then another, to use in writing his
diary.

As an adult, Tolkien could read many languages—and he made up more,
including Elvish—but the number is not the point. Even in secondary school,
Carpenter says, “Tolkien had started to look for the bones, the elements that
were common to them all.” Or, in the words of C. S. Lewis, his closest friend,
for a time, in adulthood, he had been inside language. Perhaps he couldn’t come
back out. By this I don’t mean that he couldn’t talk to his wife or his postman,
but that Old English, or at least that of “Beowulf,” was where he was happiest.
He knew how it worked, he loved its ways: how the words joined and separated,
what came after what. Old English is where he spent most of the day, in his
reading, writing, and teaching. He might have come to think that this language
was better than our modern one. The sympathy may have gone even deeper.
Like Beowulf, Tolkien was an orphan. (He was taken in by his grandparents.)
He grew up in the West Midlands, and said that the “Beowulf” poet, too, was
probably from there. He did not have difficulty living in a world of images and
symbols. (He was a Catholic from childhood.) He liked golden treasure and
coiled dragons. Perhaps, in the dark of night, he already knew what would
happen: that he would never publish his beautiful “Beowulf,” and that his

intimacy with the poem, more beautiful, would remain between him and the
poet—a secret love. ♦