

**“Scealcas of sceaðum scirmæled swyrd”: Analysing
Judith’s Language and style in translation through a key
sample case (161b-166a) and a twin coda (23 & 230)¹**

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ABSTRACT

Among the extant texts from the Old English poetic corpus that have survived up till now –*Beowulf* aside–, *Judith* constitutes a poem in which the poet “wrinkles up” the text outstandingly in order to, as Griffith (1997: 85) stated, show a new purpose for commonplace aspects of Old English poetic style. By considering a key sample case (lines 161b-166a) and a further two specific examples (lines 23 & 230), the aim of this article is to revise and analyze how *Judith’s* poetic and textual wrinkles –especially those affecting language and style, so important to explain the poem’s singular status– have been dealt with in several translations into English that cover a wide array of translation types: pioneer/philological [Cook 1889, through Barber 2008, and Gordon 1926], classic/academic [Hamer 1970 & Bradley 1982], recent/updated both complete [North, Allard and Gillies 2011 & Treharne 2010] and fragmentary [Constantine 2011]. I will always offer my own solutions to the problems raised by the text as presented in my alliterative verse translation into Spanish (Bueno & Torrado 2012).

1. Preliminary Words: What the OE writers appear to say, not to insist on what they ‘mean’

[He] preferred the term “rendered” to the term “translated.” This does seem a wise preference, since it allows for a truce of sorts between the “free” and the “faithful” or “obedient” schools of translators. Consider, for example, just a few of the primary meanings of “render” to be found in The Shorter Oxford Dictionary: “to repeat (something learned); to say over; to give in return, give back, restore; to submit to, or lay before, another for consideration or approval; to obtain or extract by melting.”

Seamus Heaney. “Foreword.” Delanty & Matto 2011: xii-xiii.

In his foreword to Delanty & Matto’s interesting anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry in translation, Seamus Heaney mentioned how some translators of Old English poetry when defining their task preferred the term “render” to the more generally used “translate.” He even aligned himself with the renderers and embraced the truce between “freedom” and “faithfulness.” I have always agreed with that truce and defended as a translator of OE poetry that we cannot forget the fact that we are translating poetry after all. When rendering a poem composed in Old English to other languages a certain degree of musicality, of rhythm, has to be maintained. Richard Marsden (2005: xvii), when explaining the philosophy of the glosses contained in his Old English *reader*, pointed out that his aim in the volume was to guide the reader through the understanding of what

the OE writers appear to *say*, not to insist on what they ‘mean’, nor merely to facilitate the production of a honed modern version which smoothes out all the wrinkles. Those wrinkles may be important, especially in poetry.

I agree with Marsden completely. In poetry, precision, detail, those wrinkles that should never be simplified, are extremely important. Whether by sheer ignorance of the original language (a very frequent thing when it comes to translations based on ancient languages) or by utter manipulation, those who translate via simplification or change will not be doing what they are supposed to do as translators. However, Marsden (2005: xxviii) seems to say that all translations are like that, even when they offer a good text: “they [translations] may be enjoyable enough to read, and in some cases they are highly accomplished, but they stray regularly from literal meaning and all too often from the original poet’s intention.” Apparently, one could think that this is a contradiction, because where can we locate the original intentions of the poet? On what he *says*? On what he *means*? In both, perhaps, as the understanding of the original text depends a lot on the translatorial perspective adopted by the translator. Again, the truce mentioned by Heaney is a necessary guide.

By considering a key sample case (ll. 161b-166a) and a further two specific examples (lines 23 & 230), the aim of this article is to revise and analyze how *Judith*’s poetic and textual wrinkles –especially those affecting language and style, so important

to explain the poem's singular status— have been dealt with in several translations into English that cover a wide array of translation types: pioneer/philological [Cook 1889, through Barber 2008, and Gordon 1926], classic/academic [Hamer 1970 & Bradley 1982], recent/updated both complete [North, Allard and Gillies 2011 & Treharne 2010] and fragmentary [Constantine 2011]. I will always offer my own solutions to the problems raised by the text as presented in my alliterative verse translation into Spanish (Bueno & Torrado 2012).

2. Rendering Textual Wrinkles: “*Micro*understanding” versus *Macro*-understanding.”

If detail and precision are vital to transfer contents in any translatorial process, when rendering Old English poetry, keeping those wrinkles is not only vital; it is mandatory. And among the extant texts from the Old English poetic corpus that have survived up till now –*Beowulf* aside–, *Judith* constitutes a poem in which the poet “wrinkles up” the text outstandingly in order to, as Griffith (1997: 85) stated, show a new purpose for commonplace aspects of Old English poetic style. Let us then revise how the aforementioned translators have managed to deal with that poetic style and the translatorial wrinkles it presented.

2.1. *Judith 161b-166a: Take the Crowd and Run*

From the many interesting sections we have in *Judith* from a translatorial point of view, the content of ll. 161b-166a has been frequently pointed out as paradigmatic of the poem's style:

Here wæs on lustum.
 Wið þæs fæstengeates folc onette,
 weras wif somod, wornum ond heapum,
 ðreatum ond ðrymmum þrungon ond urnon
 ongean ða þeodnes mægð þusendmælum,
 ealde ge geonge.
 ll. 161b-166a

Of all the editors of the text, Mark Griffith (1997: 85) is by no means the one who better signalled and defined the importance of this extract as a paradigmatic example of interlace between thematic and formal issues in *Judith*:

The sense of urgent action is achieved by the rapid movement of the verse, by an unusual use of inflectional rhyme, or *homoeoptoton*, on the dative plural ending in 163b, 164a and 165b, and by the equally unusual combining of verses of identical length and meter in 163b, 164 and 166a. Furthermore, the repetition of words for the central idea of ‘crowd’ in 163b-4a, and the variation of the closely associated notion of ‘people’ through the

particularisations *weras, wif, ealde, geonge*, shows a new purpose for these commonplace aspects of the poetic style: they no longer function just as markers of a high style, but are also deployed mimetically. Stylistic inflation imitates the magnitude of the crowd.

Thus, these lines contain different “translation units” to be considered. They all revolve around two perspectives that could be labelled as “microtraductological” (focused on the variation of a central idea of “crowd” / “people”) and “macrotraductological” (which refers to the fast movement of the verse and the aforementioned stylistic inflation as a feature that imitates the concept of “crowd”). Besides, the extract presents a well defined narrative structure: a) the host extremely rejoices (*Here, lustum*); b) the host, transformed into “people”, moves fast (*folc onette*); c) people gets, at the same time, particularized and multiplied, and its movement is highlighted (*weras, wif, somod, wornum, heapum, ðreatum, ðrymmum, þrunгон, urnon*); d) they go towards Judith (*ongean ða þeodnes mægð*), melt in a wide “great crowd” concept (*busendmælum*) that is stylistically connected by alliteration with the heroine of the poem, and get singularized again to create that feeling of inflation Griffith mentioned. As it can be seen in table 1, translators have reflected this structure and its translation units in different ways:

<i>Translators</i>	<i>Here / lustum</i>	<i>folc onette</i>	<i>wornum ond heapum</i>	<i>ðreatum ond ðrymmum</i>	<i>þrunгон ond urnon</i>
Cook 1889 (C)	war-host / joyous	folk-troop hurried	multitudes thronging	crowds and companies	crushed and jostled
Gordon 1926 (G)	people / rejoiced	host hastened	troops and throngs	swarms and crowds	surged and ran
Hamer 1970 (H)	host/rejoiced	people hastened	groups and troops	crowds and multitudes	thronged and ran
Bradley 1982 (Br)	army / in ecstasies	people rushed	flocks and droves	thronges and troops	surged forward and ran
North, Allard & Gillies 2011 (N)	war-band / in heart	people hurried	groups and bands	companies and hordes	thronged and ran
Treharne 2010 (T)	army / joyous	people hurried	multitudes and crowds	groups and troops	pressed forward and ran
Bueno 2012 (B)	ejército / extasiado	pueblo encaminó con presteza	muchedumbre sinnúmero	gran gentío	se dirigieron deprisa

Table 1. *Judith* 161b-164: Translation Units

Following the aforementioned narrative structure, a) presents no problems. All terms for *here* are acceptable variations and signal the warlike sense of the term that will be confronted later on to the more generic of “people.” However there is variation in the specificity of joy, which is only extreme in the case of “in ecstasies” (Br) and “extasiado” (B). This idiomatic expression, as Griffith (1997: 127) noted, is important as it only appears in plural form here and in *Genesis B*. In *Judith* is stylistically relevant

as it marks the first instance of the idea of “inflation” and “magnitude” that dominates the extract. Joy is qualified as extreme by the poet because Judith comes back victorious against all odds, so that magnification should be kept as an initial mark. In my own case, alliteration is also taken into account as a way to offer a better ending to the Spanish line.

Next step –b)– offers no problems. All options constitute acceptable variations of the fastness marked by *onette* and of the conversion of “host” into “people”, even though some translations keep certain warlike feeling (C) and exchange this term with the previous *here* due to stylistic reasons (G). The core part of the extract –c)– presents a wide interesting array of terms to express that central idea of massive and herd-like motion of a crowd. The *micro* perspective is kept in all cases, as translators refer correctly to the essential idea, i.e. “the repetition of words for the central idea of ‘crowd’ and the variation of the closely associated notion of ‘people’” (Griffith 1997: 85). It is on the *macro* perspective where there is some amount of variation. Translators opted for different combinations of the final lines of the extract with a certain degree, in some cases, of grammatical change (see Appendix for close details). Thus, adopting a global perspective is the best solution. Those translators who keep a fluent style without syntactic interruptions provide the best texts in translation. Exception made of Bradley and Gordon, whose prose breaks fluency with a semi-colon in mid-narration, all the rest present satisfactory combinations although only Cook and my own version add alliteration to enhance the smooth flow of the verse.

The end of the narrative –d), which, exception made of Bradley and Gordon again, everyone combines with the aforementioned main narrative body c)– presents a very curious case of variation, as seen in table 2:

<i>Translators</i>	<i>þeodnes mægð</i>	<i>þusendmælum</i>
Cook 1889 (C)	handmaid of God	in hundreds and thousands
Gordon 1926 (G)	the maiden of the Lord	in thousands
Hamer 1970 (H)	Prince’s maiden	in their thousands
Bradley 1982 (Br)	handmaid of the Lord	in their thousands
North, Allard & Gillies 2011 (N)	King’s maid	in their thousands
Treharne 2010 (T)	Lord’s maiden	in their thousands
Bueno 2012 (B)	doncella del señor	en multitud de miles

Table 2. *Judith* 165-166a: Translation Units

The previously mentioned wide “great crowd” concept (*þusendmælum*) appears as “in (their) thousands” in five out of seven translators. Curiously enough, the two minor differences are presented by those translators (Cook and Bueno) who alliteratively link the crowd with the description of our heroine, as the OE text also highlights. It is also worth noticing how all translators offer different versions of *þeodnes mægð*. Not a single option appears twice; and exception made of the two already mentioned cases (Cook & Bueno), there are no stylistic grounds in any translation to defend the lexical options offered. Although at the *micro* level all options are acceptable, it seems that it is

the *macro* level –combined with other formal poetic factors– which marks the difference between these translated texts.

2.2. Judith 22b-23: “Hleahtor wera” galore.

A second example of interest is located on ll. 22b-23, where as Griffith (1997: 111) highlights, the poet prefers “dramatic representation to narratorial comment. The general’s excessive noise and laughter signals his imminent downfall.” The poet marks the line stylistically by using alliteration (“hl-“) to reproduce the sound of that excess. So, form and content should appear joined again on translation. Table 3 reflects the lexical options the aforementioned translators present for these lines, with the addition of Constantine (2011), who has published a partial though interesting verse translation of *Judith*’s 21b-117a:

<i>Translators</i>	<i>hloh</i>	<i>hlydde</i>	<i>hlynede</i>	<i>dynede</i>
Cook 1889 (C)	laughed	shouted	uproar	raised clamour
Gordon 1926 (G)	laughed	called aloud	clamour	made outcries
Hamer 1970 (H)	laughed	roared	shouted	cried out
Bradley 1982 (Br)	laughed	bawled	roared	made a racket
North, Allard & Gillies 2011(N)	laughed	roared	shouted	dinned
Treharne 2010 (T)	laughed	got loud	roared	clamoured
Constantine 2011 (Co)	hollered	howled	raged	roared
Bueno 2012 (B)	rió	vociferando	rugió	crecer de (gritos y) clamores

Table 3. *Judith* ll.23: Translation Units

The structure “X and X, X and X” –where X stands for variants of *hloh*, *hlydde*, *hlynede* and *dynede*–, is practically reproduced in every case. Being *hloh*, a clear “laughed” in seven translations, the rest of verbal forms present accepted variants in the semantic field described: “shout, roar, clamour, etc.” Curiously enough, the only *hloh* exception is Constantine, who opts for “hollered” for convenient alliterative reasons. My own version also takes alliteration into account in the verse structure and expands the structure of line 23 to combine it with line 22 to create the effect of progression and excess aimed at by the poet (“rió y rugio vociferando/en un crecer de gritos y clamores tan grande”). Apart from Constantine and Bueno no other translator tries to reproduce any stylistic effect in this line. Although some casual alliteration with no continuity in the rest of the translation is found (N, T), basically they just reflect the content of the *micro* level very adequately but without the necessary poetic intention these lines call for, as it can be seen on table 4:

<i>Translators</i>	<i>goldwine gumena, on gytesalum hloh on hlydde, hlynede ond dynede</i>
Cook 1889 (C)	Gold-friend of warriors, glad in his wine cups; He laughed and shouted, raised clamour and uproar,
Gordon 1926 (G)	gold-friend of men, grew merry with the pouring out of wine; he laughed and called aloud, clamoured and made outcries. in festive mood, the patron of those men.
Hamer 1970 (H)	He laughed and roared, he shouted and cried out. the bountiful lord of his men, grew merry with tippling. He laughed and bawled and roared and made a racket
Bradley 1982 (Br)	gold-giving friend to his men, went wild with the pouring,
North, Allard & Gillies 2011 (N)	laughed and roared, shouted and dinned
Treharne 2010 (T)	the gold-giving friend of his men, became joyous from the drinking.
Bueno 2012 (B)	He laughed and got loud, roared and clamoured ;rió y rugió, vociferando en un crecer de gritos y clamores tan grande,

Table 4. *Judith* 22b-23.

Best results are always attained combining what the lines express as a whole rather than using words in isolation.

2.3. *Judith* 229b-230: *Swords, Sheaths and Surprises*.

The last case to be revised in this article constitutes a good example to highlight how global understanding is capital in translation. At the end of part XI, the Hebrew warriors draw their swords to fight the Assyrians and kill them all. Form and content –*micro* and *macro* perspectives– are melted again at the beginning of this final scene, as the lexical selection of the key words of the line –i.e. those that describe the warrior (*scealcas*), the sheaths (*sceaðum*) and the brightness and well-wrought quality of the swords themselves (*scirmæled*, which in fact is a *hapax legomenon*)– depends on an alliterative effect (“sc-”) that acoustically recreates the sound made by a sword when unsheathed. As it can be seen on table 5, the *micro* variants are all acceptable in the semantic range implied; some options may be preferred to the others just due to personal appreciation (more or less old-fashioned, more or less prosaic, etc) but no option is used for specific and clear stylistic reasons.

<i>Translators</i>	<i>brugdon</i>	<i>scealcas</i>	<i>of sceaðum</i>	<i>scirmæled</i>	<i>swyrd</i>
Cook 1889 (C)	drew	warriors	sheaths	well- fashioned	sword- blades
Gordon 1926 (G)	drew	men	sheaths	brightly adorned	blades
Hamer 1970 (H)	drew	warriors	sheathes	ornate gleaming	swords

Bradley 1982 (Br)	unsheathed	retainers	scabbards	bright- ornamented	swords
North, Allard & Gillies 2011 (N)	drew	marshals	sheaths	pattern- welded	longswords
Treharne 2010 (T)	drew	retainers	sheaths	brightly adorned	swords
Bueno 2012 (B)	sacaron silbando	camaradas	de las fundas	escintilantes	espadas

Table 5. *Judith* 229b-230: Translation Units.

As in former instances, the ideal approach would be to combine form and content, i.e. acceptable semantic options presented with an approach that keeps the aural quality of the original verse. As it is shown on table 6, I am quite surprised that this aural approach I offered in my Spanish version has not been attempted by any English translators, especially when similar effects have been made in the past with other medieval texts.

<i>Translators</i>	<i>mundum brugdon scealcas of sceaðum scirmæled swyrd</i>
Cook 1889 (C)	warriors drew, then, With their hands from the sheaths well-fashioned sword- blades
Gordon 1926 (G)	The men with their hands drew from the sheaths the brightly adorned blades
Hamer 1970 (H)	By hand the warriors Drew from the sheathes the ornate gleaming swords
Bradley 1982 (Br)	With their hands, retainers unsheathed from scabbards bright- ornamented swords
North, Allard & Gillies 2011 (N)	With hands from sheaths the marshals drew pattern-welded longswords
Treharne 2010 (T)	With their hands, the retainers drew brightly adorned swords from their sheaths
Bueno 2012 (B)	Con sus propias manos aquellos camaradas sacaron silbando sus escintilantes espadas de las fundas,

Table 6. *Judith* 229b-230.

Comparing the style of the author of *Judith* with that of other Anglo-Saxon *scops*, Mark Griffith (1997: 85) noted how “his style is not more pictorial than others, but it is more aural: action is communicated by a stronger appeal to the ear than usual.” I think this aural quality should be reflected in translation.

3. Final remarks: “A truce of sorts between the ‘free’ and the ‘faithful’”

At the beginning of this article I mentioned what I considered to be an apparent contradiction in Richard Marsden’s argument on the original intentions of the poet of a given text. Where can we locate them? On what he *says*? On what he *means*? He defended a literal reading but I think that very literal reading itself goes against respecting the poet’s intentions. In many of his glosses and notes Marsden himself offers at the same time a translation, an interpretation, and a possible paraphrase that melts both concepts: the literal reading and the deep reading, closely connected with the poet’s intentions. Perhaps what Marsden really believes in –and I totally agree with him– is that there are very few people with enough skills to translate Old English poetry convincingly. But those very few can do it extremely well. And when performing that difficult translatorial task they have to add special emphasis on understanding both aspects Marsden defended: the initial philological literal approach and the calm consideration of the sense that lies beneath the literal meaning, is connected with the aims of the poet –transmitted by the text– and will only be transported to the target language by our command of that very language itself and the stylistic tools it offers. These two aspects constitute just another way to define the two translatorial approaches –or rather, steps: *micro* and *macro*– many translators and critics have signaled as key aspects of poetic translation (Bueno 2010, 2011 & 2012, Conde 1995, Magennis 2012).

It is evident that nothing replaces the reading of a work in the original language it was written into. One of the most rewarding experiences an anglo-saxonist could enjoy is by no means reading with due calm and pause the original Old English text to be translated. But then again very few specialists could do that; good literature should be made available to all readers, academic and non-academic alike. That availability can only be attained by good translations we have to provide, texts by means of which readers can obtain an experience as close as possible to the reading of the original text and appreciate its style, diction, elegance and beauty, as Hugh Magennis (2012: 4) recently insisted when stating that “a good translation can enablingly provide for its readership a sense of what it is like to read the original.” No matter how difficult this task should be, this has always been the guide of good translators. That pleasure I mentioned we obtained when reading an OE text only compares with the pleasure obtained when we manage to provide a text as poetically powerful as the original in the Target Language. And to obtain such a text having a good command of OE is not enough, nor it is displaying only great poetical ability. Only combining both skills – poetic and philological– we translators could get at the truce of sorts between the free and the faithful Heaney mentioned in the quotation that introduced this paper. As we have seen in the sample cases from *Judith* revised in here, that quotation should be the motto of everyone who wants to succeed in the fascinating task of rendering Old English poetry.

Notes

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APPENDIX: *JUDITH*, LINES (161b-166a)

TRANSLATIONS

OE text (Bueno & Torrado 2012: 31)

Here wæs on lustum.

Wið þæs fæstengeates folc onette,
 weras wif somod, wornum ond heapum,
 ðreatum ond ðrymmum þrungon ond urnon ongean ða
 þeodnes mægð þusendmælum, ealde ge geonge.

Cook 1889 (C)	<p style="text-align: center;">The war-host was joyous;</p> <p>Towards the fortress-gate the folk-troop hurried, then, Both men and women, on multitudes thronging, In crowds and companies crushed and jostled Towards the handmaid of God in hundreds and thousands, Both old and young.</p>
Gordon 1926 (G)	<p>The people rejoiced, the host hastened to the fortress gate, men and women together, old and young, in troops and throngs, in swarms and crowds; surged and ran in thousands towards the maiden of the Lord.</p>
Hamer 1970 (H)	<p style="text-align: center;">The host rejoiced,</p> <p>The people hastened to the castle gate, Women and men together, groups and troops, In crowds and multitudes they thronged and ran To meet the Princes' maiden in their thousands, Both old and young.</p>
Bradley 1982 (Br)	<p>The army was in ecstasies and the people rushed towards the fortress gate, men and women together, in flocks and droves; in throngs and troops they surged forward and ran towards the handmaid of the Lord, both old and young in their thousands.</p>
North, Allard & Gillies 2011 (N)	<p style="text-align: center;">The war-band was in heart.</p> <p>People hurried towards the fortress gate, men and women both in groups and bands, companies and hordes thronged and ran</p>

towards the King's maid in their thousands,
both young and old.

Trearne 2010 (T) The army was joyous
and people hurried to the fortress gate,
men and women, in multitudes and crowds,
groups and troops pressed forward and ran
towards the Lord's maiden in their thousands,
old and young.

Bueno 2012 (B) El ejército estaba extasiado, y se encaminó
el pueblo con presteza a la puerta de la fortaleza;
hombres y mujeres, en muchedumbre sinnúmero,
en gran gentío, en multitud de miles, jóvenes y ancianos,
se dirigieron deprisa hacia la doncella del señor.
