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“A Fine Old Tale of Adventure”: Beowulf Told to the Children of the English Race, 1898–1908

Lise Jaillant

The end of the nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in the tale of *Beowulf*. University presses sold translations in prose or verse, accompanied by Old English grammars and reading books.¹ The market for *Beowulf* expanded beyond academia, reaching an audience of wealthy connoisseurs with the 1895 publication of William Morris and A. J. Wyatt’s beautifully ornamented translation.² Many Victorian readers, however, did not encounter *Beowulf* in scholarly or limited editions. They read adaptations of the medieval tale in mass-market periodicals such as Charles Dickens’s *Household Words* (Earle, “Primitive Old Epic”), and in popular editions proclaiming children as their intended audience. For instance, Mrs. Humphry (Mary Augusta) Ward’s *Milly and Olly or a Holiday among the Mountains*, published by Macmillan in 1881, featured a whole chapter on *Beowulf* told in language that even very young children could understand. Indeed, the education act of 1870 made elementary school compulsory, thus opening a new market for children’s books that built on the Victorian fascination with the Middle Ages.³

These popular versions have attracted an increasing amount of interest, as historians started examining the mass market for history in the Victorian period. For example, Rosemary Mitchell argued that the existence of a broad readership for factual and fictional history led to the “development of a historically minded mass audience by the end of the century” (*Picturing the Past* 2). Following Mitchell and others, Peter Mandler showed that this popular appetite for history participated in the construction of nationhood: “history was now seen as central to a proper understanding of the national character and its propagation as a crucial glue for social and political cohesion” (45). In *The Culture of History*, Billie Melman attempted to recover the voices of those common readers who consumed history in popular forms and gave their own meanings to the past (10). More recently, Leslie Howsam has traced the parallel

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development of academic and popular history in the Victorian period. As a book historian, Howsam pays specific attention to the commercial publishers who “suppl[ied] an enthusiastic general public with engaging and attractive works of history” (*Past into Print* 7). As she puts it, “the development of history as an academic discipline did nothing to impede the composition, publication and consumption of popular histories” (126).

Victorian children’s books have also attracted interest from medievalists, as these scholars moved away from positivist historicism and began to “see their own activities as part of a large and contentious social process rather than as situated in a timeless scholarly zone” (Frantzen and Niles 10). For example, retellings of Chaucer published for children at the turn of the twentieth century have recently been approached from a print culture perspective. Velma Bourgeois Richmond considers the economic and social context of textual production, with a meticulous attention to the central role of publishers. She argues that late nineteenth-century interest in Chaucer cannot be separated from the articulation of national and ethnic identity in both England and America. Siân Echarð’s chapter on “Bedtime Chaucer” also offers interesting insights into the physical materiality of juvenile adaptations (*Printing* 126–61). However, this scholarship is still in the early stages and has so far neglected the adaptations of *Beowulf* for a young audience. In her 1994 article, Anna Smol rightly points out the heroic ideology underlying early versions of *Beowulf* narratives, but she pays little attention to how these children’s stories were marketed. Juvenile adaptations of *Beowulf* have yet to be studied from a book history perspective. How did publishers market these children’s books to a large audience at the turn of the twentieth century? What kinds of translations were sold to potential readers, and in what form?

This essay examines three editions of *Beowulf* produced for children, first published between 1898 and 1908: A. J. Church’s “The Story of Beowulf” in *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance*; Thomas Cartwright’s *Brave Beowulf*; and H. E. Marshall’s *Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children*.⁴ I argue that the heroic and nationalistic ideology of these early versions is anchored in their “bibliographic code”: typefaces, bindings, book design, page format and layout, and other aspects of a book which give physical information about it.⁵ Drawing on Echarð’s definition of “the signs of the medieval,” I contend that Victorian and Edwardian publishers marketed archaic forms to an audience of parents and children.⁶ The medieval aspect of these children’s books, with their golden titles, decorated initials, and reproductions of period drawings, offered a suitable format for a tale presented as the founding text in English literature.

My discussion of the “bibliographic code,” however, cannot be separated from a focus on the “linguistic code.” Indeed, the archaic form is closely intertwined with the archaic language used in these adaptations. Authors were influenced by nineteenth-century scholarly editions of *Beowulf* that were characterized by complex vocabulary and grammatical structures. Children and adults were expected to learn Anglo-Saxon history by reading the tale, and the

archaic language participated in this search for origins. Finally, if juvenile versions were unified in their celebration of Beowulf as a hero, some of them also dwelled on the themes of death and mourning. These elegiac undertones are, of course, faithful to the original poem, but they also suggest an ambiguous way of imagining the Anglo-Saxon past—as both heroic and violently destructive. With their medievalizing form and language, early retellings of *Beowulf* have shaped a vision of the tale that continues to be influential in many, though not all, contemporary adaptations.

A. J. Church's *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance*

First issued in 1898, *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance* was published simultaneously by Seeley & Co. in Britain and by Macmillan in the United States. The ties between the two publishing houses dated from the 1830s, when Daniel Macmillan and his brother Alexander worked for Seeley before founding their own company. Opening an American branch in 1869, Macmillan published Mary Augusta Ward's *Milly and Olly* in both England and America in 1881. Adaptations of *Beowulf* for children were thus brought to the American market beginning in the 1880s, and Church's book benefited from an existing audience for heroic medieval stories, especially among middle-class readers. Indeed, the first edition of *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance* was sold for the mid-range price of 5s. in Britain and \$1.75 in the US.

The appeal of Church's book undoubtedly lay in its attempt to bridge the gap between scholarly and popular editions of *Beowulf*. The title page presents the author as "Rev. A. J. Church, M.A.—Formerly Professor of Latin in University College London." Here, the cultural and symbolic capital of the author stems from the prestige of his classical studies and his affiliation with a renowned English university. A prolific author of both academic and popular works, Church (1829–1912) spoke with the authoritative voice of the learned man.⁷ As he noted in the preface: "In writing the story of Beowulf I have been helped by Kemble's translation and notes, and still more by Professor Earle's admirable edition" (n. pag.). The philologist John M. Kemble had published the first translation of *Beowulf* into English in 1837. John Earle, a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, had also written a translation in prose, published in 1892. By referring to these two distinguished scholars, Church included his own work in the tradition of learned Anglo-Saxon studies. There is no mention that he intended the book to be read only by children. As Smol contends, many *Beowulf* versions "are difficult to categorize as exclusively for either adults or young readers," and would more likely appeal to a "broad audience" (90). *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance* could indeed be read as a serious work for an adult audience. But judging from the handwritten inscription in my own copy, it could also be offered to a child for Christmas. Extracts from Church's book were later reprinted in Hamilton Wright Mabie's *Heroes Every Child Should Know* (1905), confirming the juvenile audience of the book.⁸

Moreover, the colored illustrations by George Morrow would have appealed to young readers. The “expansion of general education and the creation of English studies at the university” offered a market for medieval texts, both in Britain and in the United States (Richmond 2). By putting forward his academic credentials, Church presented his text as suitable for educational purposes, thus marketing the Middle Ages to a large audience of children as well as adults.⁹

Heroes of Chivalry and Romance, which also featured stories of “King Arthur and the Round Table” and “The Treasure of the Nibelungs,” placed *Beowulf* in the larger canon of medieval heroic legends—at a time when the emphasis on heroism and strength was closely intertwined with the glorification of empire. Many scholars have written on the Victorian fascination with the Middle Ages, especially the Arthurian story, in a context of imperial expansion. For instance, Stephanie Barczewski argues that the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood played an important role in the construction of British national identity (1). A similar argument appears in Smol’s article, which states that *Beowulf* was seen as “an exemplary hero who could teach boys the virtues of their race”; retellings of his story thus promoted “racial theories of Anglo-Saxon superiority over foreign peoples” (90, 98). Indeed, Church’s narrative may be read as the bloody tale of a Saxon hero fighting evil outcasts, with an emphasis on graphic details. Hrothgar thus comments on Grendel’s horrible deeds: “the hall was bespattered with gore, and the benches reeked with blood” (11). Grendel’s crimes are vividly described: “Speedily he seized a sleeping warrior and tore him in twain, crunching the bones with his teeth, and drinking the blood from his veins” (18). Although they conform to the original text (lines 486 and 742–45), such violent fights also exemplify the brutalization of Victorian popular culture. Michael Paris points out that in the late nineteenth century, “war and preparation for war became deeply embedded in popular culture, particularly in the cultural artefacts that are created for the youth of the nation.” According to Paris, “the medieval code of the warrior with its emphasis on the qualities of duty, loyalty, sacrifice and honour” formed the basis of “the public school ethos” that influenced all aspects of British youth culture (8–9).

In Church’s tale, this heroic ideology is inscribed in language and narrative order. As Smol convincingly states:

The *Beowulf* adaptors almost always simplify the narrative order of the Old English poem, omitting its complex background of kin relationships or its suggestive juxtapositions of scenes and speeches. What is left is a story that brings into high relief the actions of *Beowulf* against three monstrous enemies, Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon. . . . The hero typically strikes a handsome, imposing figure and speaks in an elevated, archaic style. (94)

Indeed, Church divided his “Story of *Beowulf*” into three chapters: “The Slaying of Grendel,” “Grendel’s Mother,” and “The Dragon.” The heroic qualities of the mighty warrior are thus highlighted. Moreover, the language shows the influence of Kemble’s and Earle’s scholarly editions, whose difficultness stems

from the attempt to recover a pure Saxonized diction. The following examples will show the differences between Church's adaptation, based on the scholarship of his time, and Seamus Heaney's influential verse translation published a century later.

Church often favors archaic inversions, such as "a good King was he and a great, and God gave him a son for the comfort of his people" (3). The same characteristics are also found in nineteenth-century translations such as Morris and Wyatt's *Three Northern Love Stories—The Tale of Beowulf*.¹⁰ Other archaisms include the use of the pronouns "ye" and "thou," as well as the revived inflections on the end of verbs—also traits of Morris's and Earle's versions. For instance, Church makes Beowulf say: "We have heard—and whether it be true or no *thou knowest*—that some monster comes by night to devour the king's warriors in his hall" (7; my emphasis). Heaney chooses a more contemporary diction: "So tell us if what we have heard is true about this threat, whatever it is, this danger abroad in the dark nights" (lines 273–75).

It might seem obvious that Heaney, a contemporary poet, would choose a more modern vocabulary than did Church. But it is important to note that Heaney's translation targets an audience of adults, while Church's adaptation was intended, at least in part, for the juvenile market. Yet "The Story of Beowulf" might seem to us more difficult than Heaney's work. As Echard observes of Chaucer juvenile adaptations, "the taste for archaism . . . is in fact part of the appeal": "the audience for Chaucer is perceived to be attracted precisely by the archaism that also risks causing them to drop the book as soon as they pick it up" (*Printing* 163–64).¹¹ In other words, writers and publishers presented their retellings of heroic legends in the (imagined) form of medieval texts. When Church inverts the subject and the verb in "a good king was he and a great," he does not follow the order of the Old English (*þæt wæs góð cyning*) [line 11].¹² Instead, he constructs an archaic diction to meet the expectations of Victorian readers.

Likewise, Church does not hesitate to overinterpret the text to appeal to his contemporaries' taste for Anglo-Saxon etymology. For example, he notes that Scyld was "called 'Son of the Sheaf' because he came no man knew whence, being a little child in a boat with a sheaf of corn" (3). This interpretation probably originated in Earle's translation of "Scyld Scefing" (line 4) as "Scyld of the Sheaf," since the Anglo-Saxon *sceaf* has given the modern English "sheaf." Church's remark should be read in a philological context that valued "native" vocabulary (Jones 201). His observation on the "sheaf of corn" is based on the assumption that "Scefing" stands in close relation to the world of referents.

The Victorian taste for archaisms affected not only the language, but also the material aspect of the book. In Church's first edition, the contents page presents the title of each story in Saxon letterform, in an effort to anchor the modern translation in a mythical medieval past. As Echard points out, "'Gothish' characters still stand as powerful signs of the past" (*Printing* 59): "we continue to search for the aura of the medieval, expecting to find it in some kind of visual

reproduction of medieval forms as much as in the words of medieval texts” (xv). This “aura of the medieval” is also found in illustrations. George Morrow designed beautiful pictures for Church’s translation, based on the Victorian representations of Anglo-Saxons and their environment. The first illustration thus shows a group of mourners wearing horned and winged helmets (figure 1). However, such helmets were not associated with Germanic and Viking tribes until the nineteenth century (Frank). The reconstruction of the past was, in that particular case, conventional rather than scholarly, offering readers a

Figure 1. “How They Carried Scyld to the Ship” (frontispiece), illustration by George Morrow, from A. J. Church, *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance* (New York: Macmillan, 1898; n. pag.).

representation of their Saxon ancestors as strong and resilient warriors. The “bibliographic code” of the book therefore contributed to the construction of a heroic ideology anchored in a common past.

However, critics tend to overemphasize the heroic and nationalistic elements of juvenile adaptations, neglecting aspects that do not fit in their analysis. Morrow’s illustrations convey a sense of melancholy as well as heroism. The second picture thus shows the old Beowulf after his fight with the Dragon, in a pose that suggests his imminent death (figure 2). The text on the opposite page reinforces this sense of loss and sadness: “For surely now my time is come, and I can serve this people no more,” Beowulf says (56). Like the Old English poem, Church’s “The Story of Beowulf” begins with Scyld’s funeral and ends with Beowulf’s death. If it is anchored in Victorian heroic ideology, it is also a tale of mourning—a tone reinforced by the visual aspect of the book.

Figure 2. “Beowulf and the Dragon,” illustration by George Morrow, from A. J. Church, *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance* (New York: Macmillan, 1898; n. pag.).

Thomas Cartwright’s *Brave Beowulf*

Like *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance*, *Brave Beowulf* (1908) was published simultaneously in England and the United States.¹³ The British publisher Heinemann sold it in the Every Child’s Library series at 1s. 6d. for the ordinary edition and 2s. for the leather-bound variant, a very reasonable price for this small (4 x 6.5 in.) book complete with eight colored illustrations by Patten Wilson as well

as many drawings. Thomas Cartwright has left very little information about himself. He seems to have been a hack writer specializing in educational and scientific subjects.¹⁴ His contribution to the Every Child's Library amounts to at least five books, including *Sigurd, the Dragon-Slayer: A Twice-Told Tale* (1907)—a legend that also inspired Church's "The Treasure of the Nibelungs."

The publication of books in uniform series became widespread in the late nineteenth century, at the same time as medieval adaptations were gaining a larger readership. Leslie Howsam notes that "such 'sustained literary ventures,' as *The Publishers' Circular* called them, had begun in the eighteenth century, but they were particularly significant in the 1880s and 1890s" ("Sustained" 5). The uniformity of the series was part of its appeal. As Janet Friskney suggests, the "use of common title and cover design is not simply cost-effective; it creates brand-name recognition, and at its most successful encourages consumers to collect multiple volumes" (6). For example, Everyman's Library, a successful series launched by J. M. Dent in 1906, issued books with the same binding, typography, and endpapers. Although Everyman's Library published some books for young people, it did not specialize in juvenile literature. Heinemann, undoubtedly inspired by the success of Dent's series, decided to target the juvenile market with its own Every Child's Library.¹⁵ As in the case of other uniform series, the publisher profited from the customer's dislike of having an incomplete set of books. Readers who had bought Cartwright's *Sigurd* in 1907 were therefore encouraged to purchase his tale of *Beowulf* the year after. Once again, *Beowulf* was placed in the larger context of Germanic legends of the Middle Ages.

As a writer specializing in textbooks, Cartwright unsurprisingly emphasized the educational value of his *Brave Beowulf*. The preface (unpaginated in the 1908 edition) is addressed to "my dear boys and girls" and set in a cursive type, suggesting an intimate link between the writer and his young readers. Cartwright insists that his story is fun to read: "It is a fine old tale of adventure, and is sure to interest you." But the historical value of the text is also highlighted: "If you read it carefully, you will learn from it much about the manners and customs of the Anglo-Saxons, before they crossed the seas and came into Britain. This story should be read, then, as an interesting first book of Anglo-Saxon history." To help his readers understand this historical and archeological dimension, Cartwright explains that he has included drawings and a glossary at the end. In particular, the glossary offers information on pronunciation and etymology: "He-o-rot (Hart's Hall), the famous Hall built by Hrothgar. It was 'lofty and horn gabled,' hence its name" (119). In other words, the paratext conveys a sense of scholarly authority and therefore serves as an educational tool to learn about Anglo-Saxon history.¹⁶ Cartwright concludes his preface by stressing the link between his imagined audience and their ancestors: "Brave Beowulf should be a prime favourite with Anglo-Saxon children all the world over." The repetition of "Anglo-Saxon," used for Germanic medieval tribes as well as for British and American contemporary children, creates a sense of common ethnic identity.¹⁷

This nationalistic desire for origins was paradoxically articulated in a context of international trade expansion. To use the term coined by Benedict Anderson, *Brave Beowulf*, which was sold in both Britain and America, constructed an “imagined community” of Anglo-Saxons who shared not only the same language and history, but also common ethnic characteristics.¹⁸

The paratext tends to mix historical facts and fiction, in an effort to present *Beowulf* as a reliable document telling the truth about Anglo-Saxon customs. Drawings of archeological objects are thus described in relation to the text: “Ring mail Shirt or Byrnie, such as Beowulf wore”; “Old Shield such as Beowulf carried” (16–17). Other signs of the medieval include an ancient-looking drawing of a “minstrel and harp” inserted next to the description of a feast at Heorot: “Hrothgar’s minstrel sang of the sons of Finn, how that they and Hnaef the Dane were doomed to fall in Frisland” (37). Likewise, a picture of a nobleman and his thegn is entitled “Comrade of my shoulder in battle [From an old drawing]” (46). Here, the imitation of ancient manuscripts attempts to convey the prestige and aura of the medieval. As Cartwright puts it in his preface, “the story of Beowulf is told in the oldest written poem we have in our language” (n. pag.). Not only is the manuscript of *Beowulf* introduced as a precious ancient object, but the story itself is also presented as the true representation of old customs. The drawing of “the sword” shows a weapon that looks like an archeological object, next to a description of the magical properties of Hrunting: “Never in war did it deceive anyone” (53). The illustrations create continuity between historical objects and fictional elements, thus conveying the sense that *Beowulf* is an accurate testimony rather than a myth. Similarly, the glossary describes the Franks as “allies of the Frisians, the Hugas, and the Hetwaras against Hygelac when he invaded Friesland and was slain. In after years the Franks invaded the region now known as France and Germany, and founded the Merovingian dynasty” (118). Hygelac, the one figure in the poem of whom we have a historical record, gives authenticity to a tale presented as a true story.

The archaic language also anchors *Brave Beowulf* as a faithful translation of an ancient poem. Like Church and Morris, Cartwright chooses words close to the Old English. “They made fast the sea-wood” (9) refers to the Anglo-Saxon “*sae-wudu*” (line 226). Morris similarly offers, “They bound up the sea-wood” (185); Heaney, on the other hand, opts for the modern English “ship” (226). Moreover, Cartwright writes that the warriors “thanked God that the *wave-ways* had been easy for them” (9; my emphasis). This is a faithful rendition of the Old English *yth-lade*, a word Morris had also translated by “wave-ways” (185). Again, Heaney chooses a more contemporary phrasing: “They thanked God for that easy crossing on a calm sea” (227–28). Describing Grendel, Cartwright writes: “Each one of the stiff nails was like steel. Every one declared that there was nothing so hard, no sword that could cut off the *war-fist* of the giant” (34; my emphasis). “War-fist” is closer to the Old English “*beadufolme*” (battle-hand) than Heaney’s modern translation “claw” (lines 989–90). The archaic

diction favored by Cartwright and Morris conveys a sense of foreignness, unlike Heaney's more transparent language. The educational appeal of Cartwright's *Brave Beowulf* stemmed from the fact that children would have been forced to puzzle over some strange syntax or occasionally consult a dictionary. More importantly, the archaic diction reminded readers that the tale of *Beowulf* belonged to the distant and glorious past of the English nation.

The narrative order of *Brave Beowulf* reflects the same ambition to achieve authenticity. Indeed, Cartwright's text includes scenes that are often omitted in other juvenile adaptations. While the "Christian coloring"¹⁹ of the original text is absent from most retellings, Cartwright's narrator laments the "heathen ways" of the Danes (7). "They knew not God the Lord" (7) is the exact translation of the Old English "*Metod hie ne cúþon*" (line 180). Moreover, the narrator comments on his effort to clarify the Finn episode for modern readers: "The story was well known to the bard's hearers; but as the readers of this book are not likely to know it at all, it will be well to tell it much more clearly than it appears in the old story of Beowulf" (37). Here, the narrator positions himself as a modern bard, who aims to entertain and instruct his young audience by telling them a lesser-known episode of the *Beowulf* story.

The inclusion of the Finn episode also means that *Brave Beowulf* features more female characters than do other juvenile adaptations. As in the original text, the princess Hildeburh is presented as the powerless victim of the feud: "Then the dead bodies of Hnaef and the sons of Finn were burned together on the pile, and Hildeburg (sic) wept sore for the loss of her boys and her brother . . . Hengest and his men sacked Finnsburg and carried Hildeburg with much spoil back to Denmark" (38–39). In contrast to Hildeburh, the queen Wealtheow is presented as a woman with an authoritative voice. In Cartwright's text as in the Old English, Wealtheow gives a speech to thank Beowulf and to remind him to protect her children (41). Not only is Hrothgar's queen a motherly woman who welcomes the warriors to the hall, she is also a political figure who defends the interests of her people. In the 1908 edition, the layout of the text juxtaposes Wealtheow's speech with an illustration of the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother on the opposite page (figure 3). The contrast between the woman "wise of words" (23) and the "wretched woman" (43) is thus inscribed in the visual presentation of the book.²⁰ The same opposition between two female characters is paralleled at the end of the book by the tale of Queen Hygd and Queen Modthryth. Whereas most juvenile adaptations do not mention the cruel Modthryth, Cartwright's version describes the horrible deeds of "the haughty wife of Offa" (70). Moreover, Hygd is presented as a "wise" queen with a political role: "though she had lived but few years within the city, she was not mean nor sparing of gifts to the people of the Goths" (70). This fidelity to the original narrative order therefore positions *Brave Beowulf* as a trustworthy educational text suitable for schoolchildren. While other editions limit the narrative to the three fights between Beowulf and his enemies, Cartwright's version uses the complexity of the original text as the

Figure 3. Wealhtheow's speech juxtaposed with the illustration of Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, illustration by Patten Wilson, from Thomas Cartwright, *Brave Beowulf* (London: Heinemann, 1908; 40–n. pag.).

basis for its history lesson. In addition, the inclusion of a multitude of female characters offers a nuanced vision of the role of women in *Beowulf*. They are cast not only as homemakers or monsters, but also as political actors. However, the only woman featured in the illustrations is Grendel's mother. The visual aspect of the book therefore tends to reinforce heroic and violent elements and to downplay the role of positive female characters.

H. E. Marshall's *Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children*

Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children, like *Brave Beowulf*, appeared in 1908 and was published by the same American company, E. P. Dutton & Co. In Britain, Marshall's story was published by T. C. & E. C. Jack in its *Told to the Children* collection, which was very similar to Heinemann's *Every Child's Library*. The Jack series was advertised in this way:

In dainty Volumes, bound in cloth gilt, with picture designs and silk marker, at Is. 6d. each net. Also in Ornamental Boards, Price Is. each net. Printed on pure rag paper, in beautiful antique type. Each volume is illustrated with at least Eight Pictures in Colour by well-known artists.²¹

The pricing of the Told to the Children series was slightly lower than that of the Every Child's Library, for books that had a comparable small format (4.25 x 5.75 in.) and the same number of colored illustrations. Richmond argues that the Told to the Children series became "the most impressive series for very young children," with a long list of thirty-six titles (233 n2). Many of these juvenile adaptations had a medieval theme; examples include Mary MacGregor's *Stories of King Arthur's Knights* (1905) and Janet Harvey Kelman's *Stories from Chaucer* (1906). H. E. Marshall was a regular contributor to the series, with *Stories of Robin Hood* (1905), *Stories of William Tell and His Friends* (1905), and *Stories of Guy of Warwick* (1906).

Unlike Church and Cartwright, H[enrietta] E[lizabeth] Marshall (1867–1941) has not been entirely erased from collective memory. Her most famous publication, *Our Island Story: A Child's History of England* (1905) was used as a textbook in local-authority schools between the wars. British popular historians Antonia Fraser, Robert Lacey, and David McKie have recently acknowledged their debt to *Our Island Story*, which was reprinted in 2005. The following year, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography created its first entry for Marshall, showing the influence of the "history from below" school. She is presented as part of a movement of "writers of textbook and children's histories—particularly women writers working outside the developing professional historical establishment" who "resisted the removal of the traditional anecdotes" advocated by "positivist and scientific forms of historiography" (Mitchell, "Marshall").²²

For Marshall, there was no great divide between story and history. In *English Literature for Boys & Girls* (1910), she describes *Beowulf* as a historical document:

For it is not only the oldest epic poem in the Anglo-Saxon language, it is history too. By that I do not mean that the story is all true, but that by reading it carefully, we can find out much about the daily lives of our forefathers in their homes across the seas. And besides this, some of the people mentioned in the poem are mentioned in history too, and it is thought that Beowulf, the hero himself, really lived. (58)

Like Cartwright, Marshall views the story of *Beowulf* as a piece of history that reflects Anglo-Saxon ethnic characteristics. "It is, perhaps, the Celtic love of beauty, together with the Saxon love of strength and right, to which we owe much of our great literature," she writes, before introducing *Beowulf* as a tale that "the Saxons brought us from over the sea" (56). This nationalistic pride is closely intertwined with Marshall's celebration of British imperial expansion in books such as *Our Empire Story: Stories of India and the Greater Colonies* (1903).

Writing for an audience of very young children, Marshall often adds descriptions to stress the contrast between Beowulf and his men on the one hand and the monsters on the other. Unlike the original text, which remains evasive on the physical appearance of Grendel, Marshall provides a detailed portrait of the ogre:

Thick black hair hung about his face, and his teeth were long and sharp, like the tusks of an animal. His huge body and great hairy arms had the strength of ten men. He wore no armour, for his skin was tougher than any coat of mail that man or giant might weld. His nails were like steel and sharper than daggers, and by his side there hung a great pouch in which he carried off those whom he was ready to devour. (4–5)

On the opposite page, a picture of Grendel carrying a pouch supplements the narrative (figure 4).²³ The opposition between good and evil is also conveyed by antitheses: “Within the Hall was light and gladness, but without there was wrath and hate” (4). Similarly, Hrothgar’s throne is presented as a sacred object that repels viciousness: “Something sacred and pure was there, before which the wicked Ogre trembled” (8).

The moral dimension of the story stems from its description of resilience and courage, which should be understood along gender lines. In *English Children in the Olden Time* (1907), Elizabeth Godfrey (a.k.a. Jessie Bedford) observed that the old tales in general and *Beowulf* in particular “inculcated a high morality, a love of country, chivalry towards the weak, an adventurous spirit, a brave heart, a joyous delight in outdoor life, in the song of birds in the wood, in May mornings in the fields” (64).²⁴ In Marshall’s *Beowulf* as in most other adaptations, this “joyous delight in outdoor life” is embodied by the male characters, while women and girls inhabit a secluded domestic sphere. Like Church, Marshall simplified the complex narrative order of the original text, focusing instead on the three fights between Beowulf and the monsters.

Apart from Grendel’s mother, the only significant female character is Queen Wealtheow, portrayed as a fabulously beautiful woman: “Stately and tall, and very beautiful she came, clothed in rich garments girdled with gold. A golden crown was upon her head, and jewels glittered upon her neck. In her hand she held a great golden cup set with gems” (28). While the Old English mentions Wealtheow’s golden jewels and queenly behavior (lines 614, 623), there is no reference to her physical appearance. In contrast, Marshall portrays Hrothgar’s wife as an attractive queen of fairy tales, adorned in luxurious clothes: “With him walked the queen, splendid too, in robes of purple and gold, while many fair ladies followed in her train” (39–40). The text is reinforced by an illustration representing Wealtheow as a gracious young hostess, serving wine to the warriors (figure 5). As Smol puts it, “the emphasis on the queen’s beauty and good influence, reminiscent of the Victorian ‘Angel in the House’ . . . downplays her political role” (96). However, it should be noted that *Stories of Beowulf* is the only book of our corpus that features an illustration of a woman other than Grendel’s monstrous mother. Writing on *Stories from Chaucer*, also published in the Told to the Children series, Richmond suggests that the illustrations feature women partly because the book was addressed to very young children, whose education was in the hands of their mothers (88).

More generally, *Stories of Beowulf* represents Heorot with a wealth of details absent from the Old English: “vast and wide, adorned within and without with

Figure 4. "Terrible was this ogre Grendel to look upon," illustration by John R. Skelton, from H. E. Marshall, *Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children* (London, T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1908; n. pag.).

Figure 5. Wealtheow "giving to each warrior, young and old, wine from the golden cup," illustration by John R. Skelton, from H. E. Marshall, *Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children* (London, T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1908; n. pag.).

gold and ivory, with gems and carved work" (2). After Grendel's death, Heorot's reconstruction is described in this way: "beautiful tapestries gleaming with gold and colours were hung upon the walls, silken banners and embroideries were spread upon the benches, until the whole Hall glowed in splendour" (43). Neither the "ivory" nor the "tapestries" are mentioned in the original text. In fact, Marshall constructs a tale that brings into high relief the luxury of Hrothgar's court, the beauty of his wife, the courage of Beowulf, and the monstrosity of Grendel. This simplification of the text and accentuation of the most awe-inspiring elements, intertwined with stirring illustrations, increased the market appeal of the story and allowed its harmonious inclusion in a series that also featured Mary MacGregor's *Fairy Tales from Hans Andersen* (1906) and Amy Steedman's *Stories from the Arabian Nights* (1906).

In a market characterized by the proliferation of adaptations of classic literature for children (Echard, *Printing* 126), the presentation of the book had to be striking in order to encourage purchase. Indeed, the most elegant binding variant of *Stories of Beowulf* features a title in Gothic type, framed in gilt stamping. Analyzing the reference to "antique type" in the advertisement of the Told to the Children series, Echard observes that "part of the appeal of these stories, then, is a visual link to 'long ago'; however much they adapt their sources, they retain the mark of the medieval" (*Printing* 158). Addressing her young readers in the preface, Marshall also emphasizes the materiality of the text, pointing to the preservation of the ancient tale in "a little book, worn and brown with age, spoiled by fire and water" (v). The story itself cannot be separated from the fetishization of the manuscript, miraculously preserved from natural calamities and human neglect.²⁵

Marshall's book ties itself to this treasured original version not only through the visual reproduction of medieval forms, but also through the use of archaic words. This focus on the language is explicit in the preface, where Marshall presents *Beowulf* as "the oldest poem in the Anglo-Saxon language which tells of noble deeds in noble words" (v). There is, however, a tension at the heart of her version of *Beowulf*.²⁶ On the one hand, Marshall claims her desire for a language undiluted by the passage of time: "In the telling of the story I have tried to keep something of that old-time spirit" (vi). But on the other hand, an adaptation for very young children had to be readable and enjoyable. Marshall, in an effort to compromise between pleasure and authenticity, writes that the story "should be told in such beautiful words that they thrill us with delight and make us feel as if those old days were fresh and living" (vi). Her adaptation seems to have been favorably received. In *The Children's Reading*, published in the United States in 1912, Frances Jenkins Olcott described *Stories of Beowulf* as an "Anglo-Saxon saga retold in simple and excellent English" that emphasizes "heroic qualities" (121).

By today's standards, however, Marshall's language could hardly be described as "simple." Like Church and Cartwright, she favors revived inflections on the end of verbs: "So he warreth, and slayeth, and feasteth as he pleaseth" (27).

Other archaisms include inversions, ancient pronouns and grammatical forms (“Erstwhile didst thou say that thou wouldest not let thy greatness sink so long as life lasteth” [94]), and the use of words derived from the Old English (“Stout of heart and wroth against the winged beast was he” [89]). In fact, *Stories of Beowulf* often comes close to the complexity of Morris’s translation. Marshall’s line “Art thou that Beowulf who didst contend with Breca on the wide sea in a swimming match?” (23) echoes Morris’s words: “Art thou that Beowulf who won strife with Breca. . . ?” (194). Like Church and Cartwright, Marshall shows a meticulous attention to etymology. Describing Hrothgar’s hall, she writes: “It stood upon a height, vast and stately, and as it was adorned with the horns of deer, King Hrothgar named it Hart Hall” (2). Since the Anglo-Saxon *heort* has given “hart, stag, male deer” in modern English, Marshall translates “Heorot” as “hart hall.” This was in keeping with other translations, such as Morris’s. Marshall’s interpretation of the “horns of deer” constructs a mimetic relationship between the Old English “*Heorot*” and the world of referents. *Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children* therefore unites a medievalizing packaging with a language associated with a time long past.

Recent retellings of *Beowulf* for children continue to point to the Middle Ages as a mythical starting point. An example would be James Rumford’s *Beowulf: A Hero’s Tale Retold* (2007), with its Gothic type and illuminations inspired by medieval manuscripts. This visual presentation is paralleled by the archaic language, since Rumford uses only words that can be traced to their Anglo-Saxon origins. As the back cover puts it, “these iron-strong words recall the boldness of the original poem and echo the sounds of the ancient language for today’s readers.” The emphasis on strength extends to the imagined readers, since the back cover says the book is for the “strong-hearted and up.” The argument that the language reveals moral characteristics is, of course, very similar to Marshall’s celebration of “noble deeds in noble words.” Medievalizing language and form also characterize the 2007 retelling of *Beowulf* by Gareth Hinds. The book was published in two editions; on his Web site, the author describes the Candlewick Press edition as employing “a more straightforward prose translation by AJ Church,” while the self-published edition draws on “a more archaically-flavored verse translation by Francis Gummere” (“Beowulf”). Like Rumford, Hinds is on a quest for a supposedly authentic archaistic language, leading him to complete Church’s retelling with an even more difficult translation. Far from finding Church’s prose straightforward, however, the *New York Times* describes it as “antique-sounding”: “When Beowulf gets into an argument with Unferth, a jealous rival at the Danish court, for example, he says, ‘Surely the ale-can has wrought with thee, friend Unferth, that thou hast said such things’” (McGrath).

These medievalizing adaptations stand in contrast to Heaney’s clear translation. Heaney has said that the language of the *Beowulf* manuscript reminded him of the speech he grew up with in Ulster in the 1940s (Interview). For him,

rather than being a relic, Old English is a living language—or at least close to us in time. However, the packaging of Heaney’s *Beowulf* suggests that the tale belongs to a long-gone past. The cover of the 2002 Norton Critical Edition thus shows mixed silver items from the Cuerdale Hoard. According to a note on the back cover, this trove discovered in Lancashire was “buried about 905 C.E. and is the largest Viking silver hoard found in north-western Europe.” Once again, the bibliographic code associates *Beowulf* with the Scandinavian roots of the English nation. As Echard argues, “the mining of the past for visual correlatives for the poem certainly has the potential to create the situation deplored by Tolkien, reducing *Beowulf* to a kind of gloss on an archaeological past” (“BOOM” 144).

It would be naive to think that contemporary readers have rejected the kind of archaic translations sold to adults and children at the turn of the century. Translations in simple modern English coexist with adaptations that preserve the sense of a complex and remote language. The majority of *Beowulf* editions, for both children and adults, are still presented in medievalizing packaging, thus resembling late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editions. In other words, *Beowulf* is still tied to history, archeology, and the search for origins.

Notes

I am grateful to Stephen Partridge, Siân Echard, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. See, for instance, Earle’s *The Deeds of Beowulf*. The back of the 1892 edition includes a bound-in advertisement for Anglo-Saxon grammars and reading books published by the Clarendon Press.
2. Morris and Wyatt’s *The Tale of Beowulf*. Limited ed. of 300 paper copies (2 gns.) and 8 vellum copies (£10) (Peterson 84).
3. There are many parallels between the revival of interest in *Beowulf* and the popularity of the Arthurian story in the second part of the nineteenth century. On Victorians and King Arthur, see Girouard; Barczewski; Lupack; and Bryden.
4. As we will see, these books were simultaneously published in Britain and the United States. Since the three authors were British, however, my main focus will be on the British market for retellings of *Beowulf*.
5. For a discussion on the “bibliographic code” and “linguistic code,” see McGann; and Bornstein.
6. Echard defines the “signs of the medieval” as the “fonts, styles of paper, layout, kinds of binding, and the like” that are intended to convey the “aura” of the medieval (*Printing* xii, xv).
7. The British Library records 143 references for “A. J. Church.”
8. David Blamires also presents *Heroes of Chivalry and Romance* as one of the “first children’s versions of *Beowulf*” (369).

9. In his study of the Victorian fascination with the Vikings, Andrew Wawn also points out the “links between specialised scholarship and popular enthusiasm” (371).
10. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
11. This “taste for archaism” is also exemplified by the renewed preference for John Bourchier’s sixteenth-century translation of Jean Froissart’s *Chroniques* in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Echard, *Printing* 163–64).
12. All quotations from the Old English are based on Fulk, Bjork, and Niles’s *Klaeber’s Beowulf*.
13. Other scholars have assumed that Cartwright’s book was published only in America. In fact, it was published by Heinemann in London and by Dutton in New York.
14. Cartwright, who held a Bachelor of Science and might have worked as a schoolmaster, wrote textbooks such as *Handbook to Familiar & Common Objects for Object Lessons* (1897) and *Elementary Practical Chemistry for Schools of Science* (1900).
15. Both Everyman’s Library and Every Child’s Library were published by Dutton in the United States. Everyman’s Library published new titles until the 1970s. The series was relaunched in the 1990s and continues to publish hardcover editions in both the US and the UK under Random House.
16. The glossary is, of course, associated with scholarly editions. For example, the title page of Kemble’s 1837 translation of *Beowulf* promises “a copious glossary, preface, and philological notes.”
17. As Reginald Horsman notes, the term “Anglo-Saxon” came to “describe a vague brotherhood of English-speaking peoples throughout the British Isles and the world” (4).
18. *Beowulf* was not the only medieval tale popular among American children. As Girouard has shown, the Arthurian story was ubiquitous in America at the turn of the century.
19. See Blackburn.
20. Tennyson’s first version of *Idylls of the King* also involved juxtaposing the “good” and “bad” women. I am grateful to Siân Echard for pointing out this parallel to me.
21. From the advertisement bound into the back of a copy of Kelman’s *Stories from Chaucer Told to the Children*.
22. Howsam also notes: “Women writers, who even as scholars were not permitted to enter the academic world until well into the period we are discussing [1850–1950], were energetic writers of history books, especially of histories for children” (*Past into Print* 8).
23. In 1888, Bernhard ten Brink introduced the now popular notion that “*glof*” (line 2085) is not a glove, but a kind of game bag (123–24 n1). It is possible that Marshall knew about the glove/bag discussion, and based her description on this scholarly source in an effort to educate her readers. See also Pfrenger.
24. Writing in 1912, the American Frances Jenkins Olcott also underlined the energizing effect of *Beowulf* on children: “As a child begins to outgrow myths, legends, and fairy tales, he will revel in the stories of *Beowulf* and Siegfried, in the slaying of Grendel the Ogre, and the killing of Fafnir the Dragon. The combination in the tales of the wonder element and the heroic appeals to a growing child; while the Germanic strength in these products of our Northern ancestors acts like a tonic on the mind” (108).

25. In *English Literature for Boys & Girls*, Marshall gives a long account of the “adventures” of the manuscript, from its acquisition by an antiquary “in the days of Queen Elizabeth” to its final place, “now carefully treasured in a glass case in the British Museum, where any one who cares about it may go to look at it” (57–58).

26. In this passage, I draw on Chris Jones’s analysis of the tension underlying Morris’s *Beowulf*.

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