

TRANSLATION STUDY: BEOWULF/THE CANTERBURY TALES

STUDENT HANDOUTS

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Translations:

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by Nevill Coghill. Penguin Classics, 1975 (republished 1989).

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by R. M. Lumiansky. Simon and Schuster, 1948. Also available from Mass Market Paperbacks (1990).

Francis B. Gummere, trans., *Beowulf*. *The Harvard Classics*, vol. 49. P. F. Collier & Son, 1910.

Charles W. Kennedy, trans., *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*. Oxford University Press, 1940.

E. Talbot Donaldson, trans., *Beowulf: A New Prose Translation*. Norton, 1966.

Burton Raffel, trans., *Beowulf*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1971.

Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

BEOWULF

THE CASE OF THE FIRST THREE LINES

Raffel's Translation

HEAR ME! We've heard of Danish heroes,
Ancient kings and the glory they cut
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!

Kennedy's Translation

Lo! we have listened to many a lay
Of the Spear-Danes' fame, their splendor of old,
Their mighty princes, and martial deeds!

Gummere's Translation

Lo, praise of the Prowess of people-kings
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!

Donaldson's Translation

Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in
the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds.

Heaney's Translation

So. the Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

BEOWULF: THE CASE OF THE FIRST THREE LINES

	unfamiliar words	good phrasing
Raffel		
Kennedy		
Gummere		
Donalds		
Heaney		

Whose translation do you like? Why?

BEOWULF: AN EXCERPT

RAFFEL'S TRANSLATION

285 Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
290 Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
295 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch
And rushed angrily over the threshold.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
300 Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
With rows of young soldiers resting together,
305 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
By morning: the monster's mind was hot
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
310 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper.

BEOWULF: AN EXCERPT

HEANEY'S TRANSLATION

- 710 In off the moors, down through the mist brands,
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it
until it shone above him, a sheer keep
of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time
he had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling—
although never in his life, before or since,
did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.
- 720 Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead
and arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door
turned on its hinge when his hands touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
pacing the length of the patterned floor
with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,
flame more than light, flared from his eyes.
He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,
a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors
- 730 quartered together. And his glee was demonic,
picturing the mayhem: before morning
he would rip life from limb and devour them,
feed on their flesh; but his fate that night
was due to change, his days of ravaging
had come to an end.

BEOWULF: AN EXCERPT

DONALDSON'S TRANSLATION

(XI.) Then from the moor under the mist hills Grendel came walking, wearing God's anger. The foul ravager thought to catch some one of mankind there in the high hall. Under the clouds he moved until he could see most clearly the wine-hall, treasure house of men, shining with gold. That was not the first time that he had sought Hrothgar's home. Never before or since in his life-days did he find harder luck, hardier hall-thanes. The creature deprived of joy came walking to the hall. Quickly the door gave way, fastened with fire-forged bands, when he touched it with his hands. Driven by evil desire, swollen with rage, he tore it open, the hall's mouth. After that the foe at once stepped onto the shining floor, advanced angrily. From his eyes came a light not fair, most like a flame. He saw many men in the hall, a band of kinsmen all asleep together, a company of war-men. Then his heart laughed: dreadful monster, he thought that before the day came he would divide the life from the body of every one of them, for there had come to him a hope of full-feasting. It was not his fate that when that night was over he should feast on more of mankind.

BEOWULF: AN EXCERPT

Instructions: Fill in the grid with the equivalent word or phrase from the other translations.

Heaney's translation	Donaldson's translation	Raffel's translation
moors		
		bearing God's hatred
	under the clouds	
Keep of fortified gold		
	harder luck, hardier hall-thanes	
		door
	a light not fair	
		hall
quartered		
	full-feasting	
his days of ravening had come to an end.		

THE CANTERBURY TALES:

THE MILLER'S TALE

MIDDLE ENGLISH – POETRY (CHAUCER)

Whilom ther was dwellynge at oxenford
A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler,
Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye
Was turned for to lerne astrologye,
And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns,
To demen by interrogaciouns,
If that men asked hym in certein houres
Whan that maen sholde have droghte or elles
shoures

If that men asked hym what sholde bifalle
Of every thyng; I may nat rekene hem alle.
This clerk was cleped hende nicholas.
Of deerne love he koude and of solas;
And therto he was sleigh and ful privee,
And lyk a mayden mede for to see.
A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye
Allone, withouten any compaignye,
Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote;
And he hymself as sweete as is the roote
Of lycorys, or any cetewale.
His almageste, and bookes grete and smale,
His astrelabie, longynge for his art,
His augrym stones layen faire apart,
On shelves couched at his bedded heed;
His presse ycovered with a faldying reed;
And al above ther lay a gay sautrie,
On which he made a-nyghtes melodie
So swetely that all the chambre rong,
And angelus ad virginem he song;
And after that he song the kynges noote.
But often blessed was his myrie throte.
And thus this sweete clerk his tyme spent
After his freendes fyndyng and his rente.
This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf,
Of eighteene yeer she was of age.
Jelous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage.

MODERN ENGLISH – POETRY (COGHILL)

Once on a time was dwelling in Oxford
A wealthy lout who took in guests to board,
And of his craft he was a carpenter
A poor scholar was lodging with him there,
Who'd learned the arts, but all his phantasy
Was turned to study of astrology;
And knew a certain set of theorems
And could find out by variou strategems,
If me but asked of him in certain hours
When they should have a drought or else have
showers
Or if me asked of him what should befall
To anything—I cannot reckon them all.
This clerk was called the clever Nicholas,
Of secret loves he knew and their solace,
And he kept counsel, too, for he was sly
And meek as any maiden passing by.
He had a chamber in that hostelry,
And lived alone thre, without company,
All garnished with sweet herbs of good repute;
And he himself sweet-smelling as the root
Of licorice, valerian, or setwall.
His Almagest, and books both great and small,
His astrolabe, belonging to his art,
His algorism stones—all laid apart
On shelves that ranged beside his lone bed's head.
His press was covered with a cloth of red.
And over all there lay a psaltery
Whereon he made an evening's melody,
Playing so sweetly that the chamber rang;
And angelus ad virginem he sang;
And after that he warbled the King's Note:
Often in good voice was his merry throat.
And thus this gentle clerk his leisure spends
Supported by some income and his friends.
This carpenter had lately wed a wife
Whom he loved better than he loved his life;
And she was come to eighteen years of age.
Jealous he was and held her close in cage.

MODERN ENGLISH – PROSE
(LUMIANSKY)

Here begins the Miller's Tale: Once upon a time there lived at Oxford a rich fellow, a carpenter by trade, who took boarders into his home. A poor scholar, who had studied the liberal arts but whose inclination was wholly toward learning astrology, boarded with him. This scholar knew how to work out a number of problems: he could give an answer if men asked him at certain times whether there should be drought or showers, or what would happen in any given situation; I cannot recount each one.

This cleric was called clever Nicholas. He knew about secret love affairs and pleasure, in which he was most sly and cautious, appearing to be as meek as a maiden. He had a room all to himself in that boardinghouse, neatly decorated with sweet herbs, and he himself smelled as sweet as licorice root or ginger. His *Almageste*, he other books large and small, his astrolabe, which was part of his astrological equipment, and his counters for calculations, were all neatly arranged on shelves at the head of his bed. His closet was covered in heavy red cloth, and above it lay a gay psalter on which he played at night so sweetly that the whole room rang. He sang *Angelus ad virginem* and, after that, the "King's Note." His merry voice was often praised. And so this sweet cleric spent his time, living upon his own income supplemented by borrowing from his friends.

The carpenter had just married a girl whom he loved better than his life. She was eighteen years old. He was jealous...

CANTERBURY TALES: LANGUAGE AND FORMS

Purpose: to observe variants and similarities in translation from Middle English to Modern English and from modern poetic to prose form.

Middle English – poetic form (Chaucer)	Modern English – poetic form (Coghill)	Modern English – prose form (Lumiansky)
(look for words that are decidedly different as translated)	(look for word choices that are different from one another)	
	wealthy	
gnof		
		trade
dwellynge (4 th line)		
		problems
	strategems	
every Thyng		
	clever	
		secret
ful privee		
		boarding house
fetisly ydight		
	belonging to his art	
presse		
		at night
	merry throat	
rente		
	supported	