J.R.R. Tolkien: *Beowulf* – prose translation and its commentary (textual stages and witnesses)

1. Preface

1.1. On Tolkien's *Beowulf* scripts

(cf. Drout 2015, 149–153)

- »Being working drafts and scripts for lectures rather than polished work, many of these texts are extremely messy and difficult to read. They often repeat and at times contradict each other, so editing them into a consistent discussion of the poem would likely have been an impossible task. Christopher Tolkien was surely correct in choosing one of the more finished commentaries for the book.« (Drout 2015, 152)
- for an *overview of all scripts related to Tolkien's translations and commentaries* see table 1 with additions from the text in Drout 2015, 149–151)

1.2. On the purpose of Tolkien's prose translation

- His intention was »to read through in one sitting all of *Beowulf* in modern prose from his own translation, which is not intended to imitate the style of the poem but instead to help his students to grasp the poem ›whole and entire‹. He states that such a reading will take only one or two hours, and that he will then supplement the straightforward prose translation with shorter pieces from his verse translation.« (Drout 2015, 154)
- »Students would use such a translation to help explicate the Old English text, referring to the translation when they were having difficulties parsing the syntax of a sentence or recognizing unusual word forms. To be useful as a teaching and learning aid, a prose translation must above all else be accurate, taking no liberties for the sake of ornamentation or smoothness of idiom in Modern English. Students also need to be able to determine easily which lines of the original language are being translated at any given point.« (Drout 2015, 154f.)

1.3. On the translation itself

(cf. Drout 2015, 155–157.)

- »Taken as a whole, in both content and style, Tolkien's is the equal of any previous prose translation (though this is in itself, sadly, not a particularly high standard). It is accurate and transmits some of the high formality and serious tone that *Beowulf* has in Old English. I doubt, however, that it will replace Seamus Heaney's poetic translation of *Beowulf* as the text most introductory students encounter. Although Heaney's translation is poetic, it in many ways makes more concessions to Modern English syntax and style and is thus a bit easier to read. But the quality of a translation is not measured by its potential popularity. Tolkien's prose *Beowulf* is a successful rendering of the Old English poem and provides both illumination and pleasure to its reader. Experience shows that when read aloud by a gifted speaker, some passages have great rhetorical and aesthetic power.« (Drout 2015, 157)

1.4. On Christopher Tolkien's ›edition‹

(cf. Tolkien 2016, xiii; Drout 2015, 153f.)

- »The same could be said of this book. I have most emphatically not seen my role in the editions of *Sigurd and Gudrún* or *The Fall of Arthur* as the offering of a critical survey of his views, as some seem to have thought that it should be. The present work should best be regarded as a ›memorial volume‹, a ›portrait‹ (as it were) of the scholar in his time, in words of his own, hitherto unpublished.« (Tolkien 2016, xiii)
- *Critique of the exclusion of the alliterative poetic translation from Christopher Tolkien's edition:* »The exclusion of the alliterative poetic translation from the edition is more puzzling. This translation is a well-done piece of poetry, truer to the original in both form and content than any other poetic translation of *Beowulf*. Except for W. H. Auden, Tolkien was perhaps the finest alliterative poet of the 20th century, and general readers would very likely enjoy the poetic translation more than they will the prose.« (Drout 2015, 152)
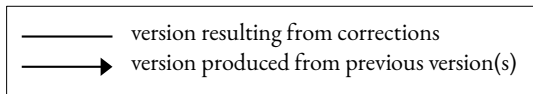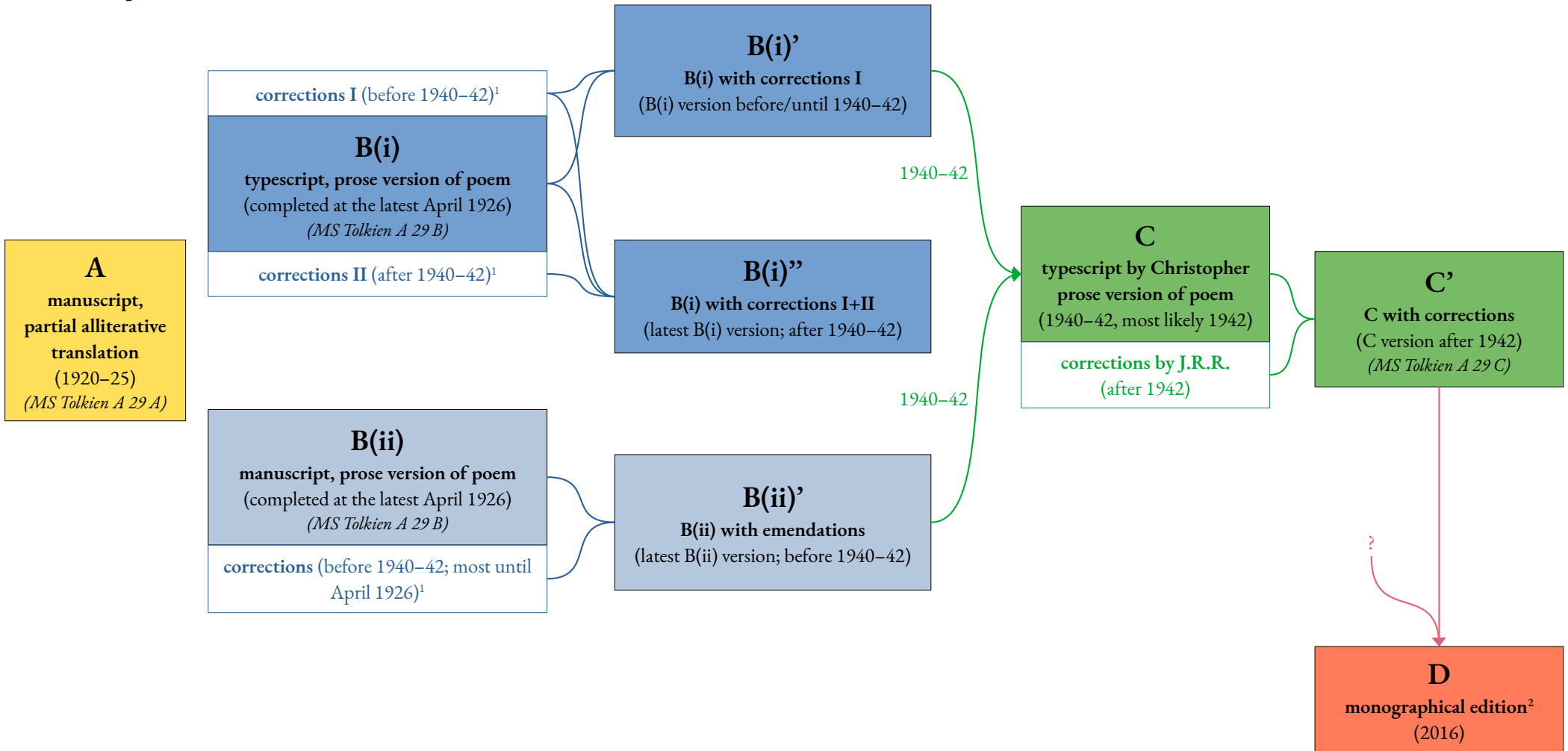
2. Published translation
(cf. Tolkien 2016, 1–11)

2.1. Textual stages and witnesses (all prose translations)
(The page numbers in brackets refer to Tolkien 2016.)

B(i) [Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tolkien A 29 B]	**B(ii)** [Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tolkien A 29 B]	**C (= Copy)** [Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tolkien A 29 C]
translation period: completed April 1926 (cf. letter in the archive of Oxford University Press from J.R.R. to Kenneth Sisam)		**production** (= copy) **period**: 1940–42 (made by Chr. Tolkien)
length: 32 page typescript	**length**: ? page manuscript	**length**: ? page typescript (existing also in a carbon copy)
range: • lines 1–1773 (translation); until »warrior of old wars, in age's fetters did lament his« • covering lines 1–2112 (Old English text)	**range**: • lines 1773–end (translation); from »youth and strength in arms« (directly following B(i)'s »did lament his«) • covering lines 2112/3(?)–end (Old English text)	**range**: • contains the whole text of the translation B = B(i) + B(ii) • most corrections of B(i) were incorporated into C together with B(i) itself (except those corrections that have been made after the incorporation of the corrections into C) • B(ii) was already in its final form
design/layout: »made on very thin paper and using what he [scil. Tolkien] called his ›midget‹ type on his Hammond typewriter« (1)		
condition: »in very poor condition, the righthand edges being darkly discoloured and in some cases badly broken or torn away, with the text at that point lost« (1)		
amendments: • »he wrote in most of the lost words in the margins (though occasionally this is not so).« (1) • »fairly heavily emended, most substantially in the passage describing Grendel's coming to Heorot and his fight with Beowulf (in the translation [lines] 574–632, which my father after preliminary emendation struck through and replaced with a rewritten passage in another type« (2f.); later very few further emendations	**amendments**: • »a good many emendations, but the majority were made at the time of the writing of the manuscript« (3)	**amendments**: • J.R.R. reviewed C and made changes of wording (dating not possible) but did not compare C with its antecedents thoroughly.
status at the time of creation of C: • most corrections of B(i) were incorporated into C; • but a few corrections were made to B(i) after this incorporation into C	**status at the time of creation of C**: • B(ii) was at this already in its latest form	**qualitative status of the C copy**: • B(i) part has »a surprisingly accurate rendering« (3) • B(ii) part has »a fair number of mistakes« (3); a couple of plain misreadings

»Thus, while the series of texts, B(i), B(ii), C, is simply stated, the layers of textual correction constitute an extremely intricate history.« (4)

2.2. Overall process

A
**manuscript,
partial alliterative
translation**
(1920–25)
(MS Tolkien A 29 A)

corrections I (before 1940–42)[1]

B(i)
typescript, prose version of poem
(completed at the latest April 1926)
(MS Tolkien A 29 B)

corrections II (after 1940–42)[1]

B(i)'
B(i) with corrections I
(B(i) version before/until 1940–42)

B(i)"
B(i) with corrections I+II
(latest B(i) version; after 1940–42)

1940–42

B(ii)
manuscript, prose version of poem
(completed at the latest April 1926)
(MS Tolkien A 29 B)

corrections (before 1940–42; most until
April 1926)[1]

B(ii)'
B(ii) with emendations
(latest B(ii) version; before 1940–42)

1940–42

C
**typescript by Christopher
prose version of poem**
(1940–42, most likely 1942)

corrections by J.R.R.
(after 1942)

C'
C with corrections
(C version after 1942)
(MS Tolkien A 29 C)

?

D
monographical edition[2]
(2016)

——— version resulting from corrections
———▶ version produced from previous version(s)

Footnotes

[1] »From his lectures of those years there survives a great deal of writing on the poem, including much on the interpretation of the detail of the text. Clearly, there was no step-by-step relationship between the lectures and the translation, but changes made to the translation (and there are many) at different times can often be seen to accord with discussion of the questions in his lectures. In other cases he did not alter the translation in the light of his later, revised opinion.« (Tolkien 2016, vii–viii)
»Some emendations to A 29 B are, as Christopher Tolkien notes, in the hand of C. S. Lewis.« (Drout 2015, 151)

[2] Labeled as »D« by myself.

2.3. Example: Much emended passage in different stages
(cf. Tolkien 2016, 4–8)

(a) Text of B(i)	(b) Text of B(i)' [= emended B(i)]	(b) Text of C	(c) Text of C' [= emended C]
»Weary of the sea they set their tall shields [*words lost*] … ed and wondrous hard, against that mansion's wall, then turned they to the benches. Corslets changed, the war-harness of those warriors; their spears were piled together, weapons with ashen haft each <u>grey-tipped with steel</u>. Well furnished with weapons was [*words lost:* the iron-]clad company. There a proud knight then asked those men of battle concerning their lineage: ›Whence bear ye your gold-plated shields, your grey shirts of mail, your vizored helms and throng of warlike spears? I am Hrothgar's herald and esquire. Never have I seen so many men of alien folk more proud of heart! Methinks that <u>in pride</u>, not in the ways of banished men, nay, <u>with valiant purpose</u> are <u>you come</u> seeking Hrothgar.‹ To him then made answer, strong and bold, the proud prince of the Weder-Geats; these words he spake in turn, grim beneath his helmet: ›Companions of Hygelac's <u>table</u> are we; Beowulf is my name.‹« (4f.)	»Weary of the sea they set their tall shields and bucklers wondrous hard against the wall of the house, and sat then on the bench. Corslets rang, war-harness of men. Their spears were piled together, seamen's gear, ash-wood <u>steel-tipped with grey</u>. Well furnished with weapons was the iron-mailed company. There then a knight in proud array asked those men of battle concerning their lineage: ›Whence bear ye your gold-plated shields, your grey shirts of mail, your vizored helms and throng of warlike spears? I am Hrothgar's herald and esquire. Never have I seen so many men of alien folk more proud of heart! I deem that <u>with proud purpose</u>, not in the ways of banished men, nay, <u>in greatness of heart you are come</u> seeking Hrothgar.‹ To him then, strong and bold, the proud prince of the Weder-Geats replied, these words he spake in answer, stern beneath his helm: ›We are companions of Hygelac's <u>board</u>; Beowulf is my name.‹« (5)

changes in wording: B(i) > B(i)' | »Weary of the sea they set their tall shields and bucklers wondrous hard against the wall of the house, and sat then on the bench. Corslets rang, war-harness of men. Their spears were piled together, seamen's gear, ash-wood <u>steel-tipped [...]</u>. Well furnished with weapons was the iron-mailed company. There then a knight in proud array asked those men of battle concerning their lineage: ›Whence bear ye your gold-plated shields, your grey shirts of mail, your vizored helms and throng of warlike spears? I am Hrothgar's herald and esquire. Never have I seen so many men of alien folk more proud of heart! I deem that <u>with proud purpose</u>, not in the ways of banished men, nay, <u>with</u> greatness of heart <u>you are come</u> seeking Hrothgar.‹ To him then, strong and bold, the proud prince of the Weder-Geats replied, these words he spake in answer, stern beneath his helm: ›We are companions of Hygelac's <u>board</u>; Beowulf is my name.‹« (cf. 5f.)

changes in wording: B(i)' > C (≙ typing errors) | »Weary of the sea they set their tall shields, bucklers wondrous hard, against the wall of the house, and sat then on the bench. Corslets rang, war-harness of men. Their spears stood piled together, seamen's gear, ash-hafted, grey-tipped with steel. Well furnished with weapons was the iron-mailed company. There then a knight in proud array asked those men of battle concerning their lineage: ›Whence bear ye your plated shields, your grey shirts of mail, your masked helms and throng of warlike shafts? I am Hrothgar's herald and servant. Never have I seen so many men of outland folk more proud of bearing! I deem that in pride, not in the ways of banished men, nay, <u>with greatness</u> of heart <u>you have come</u> seeking Hrothgar!‹ To him then, strong and bold, the proud prince of the Windloving folk replied, [...] words he spake in answer, stern beneath his helm: ›We are companions of Hygelac's <u>table</u>; Beowulf is my name.‹« (6)

changes in wording: C > C' |

<u>lined underline</u>: revisions returned in C to the B(i) version

<u>dashed underline</u>: corrections of C(') in D:
typing error of Christopher in C (and no correction by J.R.R. in C'): *with greatness* (C) > *in greatness* (D)
mistake of J.R.R.: *you have come* (C') > *ye have come* (D)

3. Published Commentary. Some notes on its nature and usage as well as Tolkien's mode of working in this regard

(cf. Tolkien: Beowulf (2016), vii–xiii.131–135; Drout 2015, 150f.157–166)

- »He [scil. J.R.R. Tolkien] did indeed explicitly intend that the series of lectures on *Beowulf* which I have used in this book should be a ›textual commentary‹, closely concernced with verbal detail. In practice however he found this restriction confining: he was very often led from the discussion of a word or phrase to more far-reaching exposition of the characteristics of the Old English poet, his thought and his style and his purpose; and in the course of the lectures there are many short but illuminating ›essays‹, arising from specific points in the text. As he wrote, ›I try to do it, yet it is not really possible or satisfactory, to separate one's commentary into ›legendary content‹ and ›text‹.‹« (Tolkien 2016, viii)
- »I [scil. Christopher Tolkien] have included a number of notes from the lectures on very minor points in the text that illustrate how from a small grammatical or etymological detail he [scil. J.R.R. Tolkien] would derive larger conclusions;« (Tolkien 2016, xii)
- »This inconsistency between the translation and commentary is emblematic of the problems Christopher Tolkien faced when attempting to use the latter as critical notes for the translation. Quite often particular interpretations for which Tolkien argues in the commentary are not incorporated into the translation, which, as noted earlier, is in content kind of a lowest common denominator of what would be accepted by *Beowulf* scholars.« (Drout 2015, 158)
- »The same cannot be said, however, for his interpretation of the history, composition, and sources of the poem, which is novel and idiosyncratic. Unfortunately, Tolkien's view is never presented as a single sustained argument but is instead distributed throughout the separate notes of the commentary.« (Drout 2015, 159)
- »Tolkien is so confident about his understanding of *Beowulf* that he is willing to invert completely the logic of several manuscript readings in order to make the text consistent with his larger-scale interpretation of the poem. Such confidence is not unearned. Some of Tolkien's interpretations of individual scenes and passages are so good, so rich, complex, and detailed, that I find myself worrying that he has improved upon rather than merely explicated the text, that in his interpretation he has made *Beowulf* better than it really is by inferring more detail than the poet provides.« (Drout 2015, 162f.)

4. Drout's Critical Conclusion

»J.R.R. Tolkien was the greatest philologist of his time, his like is not in the world today, and *Beowulf* was his particular object of study. To read his thoughts about the poem, even if these are at times unfinished and or in imperfect form, is a great gift. The field of *Beowulf* scholarship is therefore in Christopher Tolkien's debt for editing and publishing these materials and for presenting them in such a clear, logical, and physically handsome form. It is difficult to imagine any other arrangement of text, or any different set of editing practices, that would make Tolkien's work on *Beowulf* more accessible to multiple audiences. [...] Some readers may be disappointed that, with the exception of the parallel between Unferth and Wormtongue and Tolkien's interest in the word *gríma*, the volume does not provide us with many previously unnoted links between *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. But the lack of direct borrowings from the translation should not obscure the deep interconnection between Tolkien's understanding of *Beowulf* and his creation of his literary works.« (Drout 2015, 169)

Bibliography

Tolkien, J.R.R.: Beowulf. A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell [2014], edited by Christopher Tolkien, HarperCollins: London 2016 [978-0-00-759009-4].

Drout, Michael D.C.: Review of »Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell by J.R.R. Tolkien (2014)«, in: Tolkien Studies 12 (2015), no. 1, 149–173 [10.1353/tks.2015.0014].