

## Two Translators from Old English: Molly Peacock and Gwendolyn Morgan

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In the introduction to her *Anglo-Saxon Poetry in Imitative Translation: The Harp and The Cross*, Gwendolyn A. Morgan decries “the virtual neglect of Anglo-Saxon poetry in the study of English literature”;<sup>1</sup> her project in the book is to “make accessible to a modern audience the art of the Anglo-Saxons *as* art and not relic.”<sup>2</sup> Her project is a big one, characteristic of Morgan. Elsewhere, she offers an innovative study of ballads in late medieval England as an instrument of social change and protest developed by the peasantry, and a similarly innovative study of how and why writers of modern fiction invent fraudulent medieval authorities to serve various purposes in their texts.<sup>3</sup> She presses the academy towards greater engagement with non-academics and general readers, and she presses the boundaries of her chosen fields of medieval studies and especially medievalism. As above, she believes that Anglo-Saxon poetry is insufficiently incorporated into the mainstream of the field of English literature, and needs to be placed more fully as the origin story of English, and more particularly of English poetry. At conferences, including her beloved *Studies in Medievalism* conferences, she is always the person questioning the assumptions behind papers, unimpressed by glib explanations, and pushing for more engagement and more work. In this paper, then, I hope to look at Gwen’s own engagement with the project of translating Old English poetry, and to do so from two perspectives: first, the growing interest among poets in particular—and to some extent the general public—in Old English texts and their modern reconfigurations; and second, her love of riddles and proverbial literature, a world in which—as she puts it—“riddles emphasize the significant duality which is the essence of the natural world.”<sup>4</sup> Gwen’s translations of Old English riddles and riddling texts are suggestive, and even more striking when compared to other recent translations of these texts. I want to investigate how perceptions of Old English appear to be shifting, and the role of translation in that process, using Riddle 74 and the enigmatic “Wulf and Eadwacer.” Fortunately, Molly Peacock, an American-Canadian writer and essayist and poet, has also addressed these two poems, so this paper is a consideration of these two thinkers and their intersections with Old English poetry. Where Gwendolyn Morgan is a Canadian living and working for her academic career in the United States, Molly Peacock is a poet and independent writer from upstate New York, later New York City, and nowadays living in Canada. Both Morgan and Peacock use thinking about Old English poetry and its translation to cast light on English literature more generally, and on living in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn A. Morgan, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry in Imitative Translation: The Harp and The Cross* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Morgan, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 12 (her emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> See Gwendolyn A. Morgan, *Medieval Balladry and the Courtly Tradition: Literature of Revolt and Assimilation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), and *The Invention of False Medieval Authorities as a Literary Device in Popular Fiction: From Tolkien to the Da Vinci Code* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); see also her edition and translation of medieval English ballads: *Medieval Ballads: Chivalry, Romance, and Everyday Life: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See “Duality in *Piers Plowman* and the Anglo-Saxon Riddles (A Response to Arthur Versluis),” *Connotations* 1.2 (July 1991): 168-72 (169).

Riddle 74 from the second large batch in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501, prepared possibly at Exeter around the turn of the eleventh century) is a good starting point.<sup>5</sup> The manuscript offers no solutions for the riddles, which for the ones that were not translations or adaptations of existing Latin riddles from the collections of Symphosius, Eusebius or Tatwine often means uncertainty or ambiguity about the solution.<sup>6</sup> As Krapp and Dobbie point out in the standard edition of the Exeter Book, the possible translations for this riddle are “cuttlefish,” “water,” “siren,” and “swan.”<sup>7</sup> Krapp and Dobbie go for “swan.” Since their edition the possible interpretations have expanded logarithmically. Here is the riddle, and a very literal translation:

Ic was fæmne geong,                      feaxhar cwene,  
ond ænlic rinc                      on ane tid;  
fleah mid fuglum                      ond on flode swom,  
deaf under ype                      dead mid fiscum,  
ond on foldan stop,                      hæfde ferð cwicu.

[I was a young woman, a gray-haired queen, and a singular warrior at the same time; I flew with the birds and swam in the ocean, dove under the wave, [was] dead among the fishes, and stepped onto the earth; I had a living soul.]

Good translators and good poets often come back to their work and tweak it, shifting the emphasis, altering the approach, choosing to focus more on one element than another. Willis Barnstone, an adept translator of poetry himself, argues that translation works on three different sets of criteria, each of them a continuum: a literal or free approach to the register rendering the text word by word, sense by sense, or with poetic license to recreate; the attempt to replicate the voice of the source text in the target text or to appropriate that voice; and issues of structure involving whether the translator attempts to replicate the structure or form of the original or to transmute it into a genre more appropriate to the culture of the target language.<sup>8</sup> For example, the literal translation above attempts to render the lexicon exactly and thereby replicating the register very precisely, to some extent stifles the voice of the original since it does not have the alliteration and patterning of sound

<sup>5</sup> Scholarship on the riddles is vast: a good, if dated, introduction is F. H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles* (Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities, 1982); a thoughtful and engaging recent study which was very helpful for my purposes here is John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), which ranges more broadly than the riddles themselves.

<sup>6</sup> The riddles of Anglo-Saxon England have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention; see Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, and more recently Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Niles discusses this riddle in his first chapter, “Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text,” pp. 11-56; on this riddle see also Mark Griffith, “Exeter Book Riddle 74 *ac* ‘oak’ and *bat* ‘boat,’” *Notes and Queries* 55 (2008): 393-6.

<sup>7</sup> *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 234, 371. The text of Riddle 74, quoted below, is on the former page, with the possible solutions discussed in the notes on the latter.

<sup>8</sup> Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 26-29. Barnstone attempts to incorporate commercial translation at one extreme, and poetic recreation at the other; his analysis is more successful on the voice and register of poetic translation.

or the short half-lines, and falls partway down the continuum on structure since it renders the text as simple prose in modern syntax, not as alliterative poetry, but also not as something more appropriate to modern English poetics such as free verse. Gwendolyn Morgan's first translation of this riddle has a somewhat similar aspect:

I was a young woman,      a grey-haired wife,  
and a noble warrior,      in one hour,  
flew with birds              and in the sea swam,  
dove under the waves,      dead among fishes,  
and on earth walked,      had a living soul.<sup>9</sup>

The analysis following this translation argues that the solution is "reflection," in that the opening images are of things that are reflected in a mirror or in water, and the later clues indicate more clearly the idea of a reflection in water, tied to the original, with a living soul, being reflected, but not having its own independent life. Morgan also takes the riddle holistically, as one syntactic bundle piling image and riddling perception one upon the other. Her riddle ignores the editorial punctuation in Krapp and Dobbie, and translates one long clause. Later, Morgan presents an alliterating translation which keeps the structure and voice of the original, shifting somewhat further down the continuum towards free translation for its register. The solution is given as the title:

Reflection  
I was a fresh young girl,      a faded crone,  
and an honored man      in an hour.  
I flew with falcons      and floated on waves—  
dropped under water,      dead among fishes,  
and walked firm ground      in living form.

This translation works to recreate the alliterative form of an Old English poem, holding onto the half-lines, and altering the translation to keep the first, third, and fifth lines with "P" alliteration, with lines two and four on "h" and "d." This version offers a more stichic structure, but does in the final line depart from Old English metre by having alliteration on the fourth stress. As she worked through her responses to this riddle, Morgan established a freer approach, taking more licence. For comparative purposes, here is a translation of the same riddle by Molly Peacock, from a recent and acclaimed collection of translations of Anglo-Saxon poems:

I Was a Girl,      a Gray Queen  
I was a girl,      a gray queen,  
and a man, solo,      all in a single hour.

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<sup>9</sup> Morgan, "Duality in *Piers Plowman* and the Anglo-Saxon Riddle," 171.

I flew with the birds        swam in the seas  
dove under waves        died with the fishes  
and stepped out on earth        —alive, all in a single soul.<sup>10</sup>

The solution to this riddle provided in the book's index is "A Ship's Figurehead," and Peacock's assured poem reflects that interpretation, albeit obliquely. Interestingly, her interpretation holds very close to the lexicon of the Old English, rendering *cwen* "queen" and *stop* "stepped," for example, and keeping with modern English cognates to the Old English where possible. Both Morgan and Peacock hold to the first-person voice, and insist on the half-line rhythm of the original. Peacock uses some alliteration but sparsely, and plays more with rhetorical parallelism. Although she is not an academic like Morgan, she finds her way to strong half-line parallel structures, and she plays on the singularity, the individual qualities of the anthropomorphized narrator with "sole," "single" and "a single soul." Here is an alienated figure of duality, stepping on the earth and diving in the seas. Riddle 74 is a complex enigma; in the sure hands of both Morgan and Peacock it achieves several semiotic layers and quite remarkably different valences.

A second example is *Wulf and Eadwacer*, a poem that used to be taken as the first of the first batch of riddles, but nowadays is usually taken with "The Wife's Lament" as a *Frauenlied*, a woman's song. ("The Wife's Lament," intriguingly, is the first poem after the first batch of riddles.) Problems in translation and interpretation abound. For example, the first line is *Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife*, often sketched out as "It is for my people as if someone were to give them *lac*."<sup>11</sup> *Lac* could mean "gift" or "present" at one extreme of the semantic scale, but also "offering" shading into "sacrifice" and "death" at the other. In the next line the male protagonist is described as possibly coming *on preat*, which also offers a significant semantic range, from "in a war party" or "as a threat" "with violence" to "in a company" or "to the company" and even to "in a state of need," "in trouble" or even further to "in starvation." As the poem moves forward in its spare fourteen lines, the first-person female narrator invokes a partner named Wulf who is separated from her, later calls on Eadwacer (perhaps a second lover or another name for Wulf), and describes their *hwelp* (their child, whelp, cub, or perhaps metaphorically their love, now stillborn) as being carried off by a wolf to the woods. The poem is allusive, filled with concrete images of despair and alienation, and has a refrain at lines 3 and 8: *ungelic is us*, "It is different with us." Richard Hamer's spare translation of the refrain is "We are apart."<sup>12</sup> Its interpretation has been an enigma, partly because of its proximity to the riddles, partly because it plunges us into a scene of misery and solitude that is possibly metaphorical and possibly very concrete, and partly because the roles of the characters mentioned are so very ambiguous.

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<sup>10</sup> Molly Peacock, "I Was a Girl, a Gray Queen" in *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*, ed. Greg Delanty and Michael Matto (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 455.

<sup>11</sup> The standard edition is Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, introduction on pp. liv-lvii, text pp. 179-80, and notes pp. 320-1.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse: Selected with An Introduction and a Parallel Verse Translation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 84-5.

Peacock, in a book on how to read a poem, uses the Michael Alexander translation of “Wulf and Eadwacer” as the basis for a reverie on the poem’s meaning, finding the enigma and passion at its core.<sup>13</sup> It serves as one of her talisman poems, a poem that she has come to apprehend as “a sensuous mental activity” (3-4) and one of the poems she recommends for use in a poetry circle. Peacock lingers on the riddling quality of the poem, on its sound and structure, and notably on its raw emotion, the tumult. She describes the poem as the work of a queen, the wife of a tribal chieftain, sending out an SOS, declaring her emergency. Alexander translates the first lines as “The men of my tribe would treat him as game: / if he comes to the camp they will kill him outright.” *Lac* here is “game” and *on þreat* is “to the camp.” Peacock believes that the translator, Alexander, “seems to climb inside that ancient voice with the very first line” (41) sweeping us “into her tribal world of chieftains, the world before the Christian conversion, the world of hunt and game—and the hunted” (41). She lingers as well on the refrain, since Alexander offers the metaphorical, and for Peacock very profound and moving, “Our fate is forked.” The alliteration, the use of the metaphorically powerful image of a fork in the road taking the two individuals in different directions, the call to a somewhat more spiritual interpretation with the introduction of divergent fates: all these elements make this interpretation by Alexander a timeless poetic moment for Peacock.

Paul Muldoon’s translation appears in the Delanty/Matto volume (Muldoon is an Irish poet from County Armagh in the north, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2003). Here are the opening lines and the ending:

My tribe would welcome him with open arms  
 were he to show up with a war party or otherwise pose a threat.  
 How differently it goes for us...  
 Wulf on one island and myself on another,  
 an island full of hard men  
 who would welcome him with open arms...  
 How very differently it goes for us...  
 .....  
 Be mindful, Eadwacer, be mindful of our cub  
 carried off by a Wulf into the woods,  
 of how soon may be cut short what’s scarcely been composed—  
 the song of us two together.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Molly Peacock, “A Queen Sends an SOS,” chap. 4 in *How to Read a Poem...and Start a Poetry Circle* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 37-49. She quotes the translation from Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; New York: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Paul Muldoon, “Wulf and Eadwacer,” in Delanty and Matto, *The Word Exchange*, 51. In line 18 “scarely” appears; it has been amended here to “scarcely.”

Where the Alexander version beloved by Peacock maintains alliteration in each line, Muldoon chooses free verse with occasional hits of alliteration and a great effort towards literal translation. He uses rhetorical parallelism and repetition, with “Wulf—Wulf—” and “Be mindful, Eadwacer, be mindful” and an extended interpretation of the refrain: “How differently it goes for us” with a following ellipsis. Muldoon’s poetry is full of uncertainties, lines tailing off, ideas opened but not pursued, loose ends and ambiguities. Muldoon also focuses on the poem as metafiction, the *uncer giedd geador* “the song of us two together” of the last line being foreshadowed in the previous line as a song—a relationship—which has “scarcely been composed.” His female protagonist is a pawn in a world of “hard men,” perhaps in the Irish mode, offering her thoughts but phrasing them as a plea to be mindful and a sad remembrance of what might have been but has been so drastically cut off.

Morgan, like Muldoon, offers a facing-page translation with the source text on the left. Her version is, however, quite different in tone and approach:

It is for my people      as if a man-price were offered,  
they want to butcher him      if he brings his troop.  
Unlike with us.  
Wulf is on an isle      and I on another,  
fast is that island      surrounded by fens.  
There are murderous      men on the island,  
they want to butcher him      if he brings his troop.  
Unlike with us.  
In Wulf’s long wandering      I wasted my heart.  
When the weather was rainy      and I sat weeping,  
when the bold-in-battle      bound me in his arms,  
I found that some relief,      I found that loathsome too.  
Wulf, my Wulf!      My want of you  
has made me sick,      your seldom coming,  
my forlorn love,      not lack of food!  
Hear this, Eadwacer!      Our wretched whelp  
Wulf bears to the wood.  
A man easily rends      what is not rightly joined,  
our song together.<sup>15</sup>

Both Morgan and Peacock (the latter through Alexander) see the dangers, the threat to the beloved. They both worry for his survival, and think that he will be killed, or butchered, if he should come to her. Muldoon translates the opening lines with far more ambiguity: he will be welcomed “with open

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<sup>15</sup> Morgan, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry in Imitative Translation*, 119. Line 16 begins with “Here,” which has been emended here for sense and translation to “Hear.”

arms” but those open arms could be either positive or negative. Muldoon and Alexander both introduce a second male lover midway through the poem, whereas Morgan leaves that unclear, simply indicating “the bold-in-battle bound me in his arms.” That is, this individual could be Wulf reappearing in person or in dream, and being invoked two lines later, which lends credence to this interpretation. Peacock considers that this individual is an attempt at substitution, although, as she points out, “as we all learn from our experiences, the substitute never really replaces the lost love.”<sup>16</sup> Both Morgan and Peacock offer a psychological interpretation of the woman’s predicament and engage with her suffering directly. Morgan finishes with a very strong statement “A man easily rends what is not rightly joined, / our song together.” Where Muldoon turns to a metafictional meditation in the last line, Morgan makes the straightforward complaint that men can end relationships easily; by implication, women cannot. She takes *mon*, almost always taken as the indefinite pronoun “one” or “someone” as the gender-specific “man.” To make this interpretation clearer, she specifies “A man.” The final two lines become a kind of gnomic statement of an eternal truth, and one which specifies the power of the male to begin and end relationships.

In her introduction to this translation, Morgan argues that the first-person narrator here is a woman who places her own needs above the social role she is required to play, a figure in the transition from a shame culture to a guilt culture in which the public and private needs of the individual are reconfiguring themselves.<sup>17</sup> She might well have noted that these issues remain alive today. Peacock repeatedly suggests that we identify with the woman in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, that we connect with her and engage with the fierce desires that she experiences. Morgan is more circumspect, more the academic, as she asks open-ended questions about how to solve the enigma of this poem, how to interpret it. At the same time, hers is the fiercer translation, opening a feminist door to the past and holding it open for the present and future. Adam Roberts, another recent scholar of riddles, argues that “crime is a riddle.”<sup>18</sup> Solving the puzzle of a crime requires concentration and intelligence and a willingness to keep turning all the evidence about and working with it until it slots into place. Morgan does not, perhaps, slot the evidence into place, but she very much works with it, engages with it, translates it and presents it so that a modern reader can encounter it as a live and fascinating text. In so doing, Morgan brings the most fascinating materials of the Anglo-Saxon period back into dialogue with the twenty-first century. Where the Matto and Delanty volume now treads, it does so in the footsteps provided by Morgan. Seamus Heaney, in the introduction to *The Word Exchange*, argues for “the ongoing vitality of Anglo-Saxon poetry a millennium after its demise might have been expected.”<sup>19</sup> Morgan, and quite probably all Anglo-Saxonists, would agree. The challenge lies in following the path and making this material sing to a new generation the way that it sings to Molly Peacock and to Gwendolyn Morgan.

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<sup>16</sup> Peacock, *How to Read a Poem*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry in Imitative Translation*, 110-111.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Roberts, *The Riddles of The Hobbit* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Foreword,” in Delanty and Matto, *The Word Exchange*, xi-xiii (xiii).