Why the classics are retranslated

The New York Times, February 1, 2001

I confess that it's been years since I thought about rereading ''Beowulf'' or ''The Inferno,'' but now I have new translations of each before me so it seems the moment to re-examine them, both as a reader and as a columnist. I remember them from high school as rousing tales in their own ways, with blood and guts and dragons, beasts and passion and lust. Both very different from ''Silas Marner,'' for instance, which was the literary castor oil that generations of high school students were also forced to choke down.

Now it may be a bit of a puzzlement: do we really need new translations of these canonical works? Well, why do we need another recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? There are endless recordings of the classics, and to people who have the occasion to buy one for a gift the choices are sometimes bewildering. The same can be said for classical literature. Is there an academic or a commercial need for new translations? It would seem that each generation views and interprets classical works in the light of its own experience -- a justification for updating them -- except perhaps for Shakespeare, who confronts us all the time in movies and the theater and who is very much alive and with us.

There's nothing trendy or audacious about commissioning these new translations. They take years of development. Yes, publishers feel good and even worthy about reissuing the classics. But they are even happier with the knowledge that each classic title reissued becomes part of its publisher's all important backlist, to be sold to about 40 years' worth of students. A comforting annuity for the translators, who mostly receive modest advances but nifty royalties over the years, and a cash coup for the publisher. For instance, Penguin sells nearly 70,000 copies of ''Beowulf'' annually.

The most successful recent translation of a classic, both commercially and perhaps artistically as well, is Seamus Heaney's ''Beowulf'' (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The Irish Nobel laureate's verse translation (bilingual edition: English and Anglo-Saxon) was on the New York Times fiction best-seller list for 10 weeks last year and has sold more than 200,000 copies in hardback. These sales seem truly aberrational. Classics generally sell in the small thousands. Whatever the case, all those involved ''are hugging themselves with delight,'' is the way one publishing executive put it. Mr. Heaney's ''Beowulf'' can also be bought in trade paperback for $13.95 from that edition's publisher, W. W. Norton, which expects to at least equal those sales -- top them, in fact, over the years. It has a first printing of 100,000 copies. (Norton commissioned the poet to do this translation years ago for its own anthology of English literature but sold the hardcover rights to the house that had always published his poetry, Farrar, Strauss.)

Jonathan Galassi, publisher and editor in chief of Farrar, Strauss, explained the fantastic success of Mr. Heaney's ''Beowulf'' in part this way: ''It was a wonderful translation by a believable writer and it had fantastic reviews. But I think it was one of those rare cases where everybody felt he or she should have read this at one time, and there it was to be read now.''

Now there's also a new bilingual translation of "The Inferno" (Doubleday) by Robert Hollander, a Dante scholar at Princeton University, and the poet Jean Hollander, his wife. It went on sale in late December with a first printing of about 25,000 copies. Gerald Howard, executive editor of Doubleday, said: ''There's a very complicated worldview underlying the poem, and different aspects of that come to the fore in different

translations. No translation can ever be perfect."

The last major translation was by Robert Pinsky in 1995, and it was published by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. Quite naturally that former poet laureate's book had a perhaps more lyrical quality than does the Hollanders' version, which has firmer scholarship and accuracy than Mr. Pinsky's, Mr. Howard said.

Renewing the classics is a continual process. In recent years, as these things go, Viking had new versions of "The Iliad" and later "The Odyssey" translated by Robert Fagles, and last year Stanley Lombardo's translation of "The Odyssey" was published by Hackett.

And a raunchier and gamier translation of "Aesop's Fables" was published by Penguin Classics in which, playing off the ancient myth that hyenas changed gender every year, one fable tells of the fox's rejecting the hyena's female incarnation because he couldn't know "whether you would be my girlfriend or my boyfriend." In another, after a male hyena attempts what the fable calls an "unnatural act," the female hyena warns him to "remember that what you do to me will soon be done to you."

Now all this is good for literature, but it's also great for commerce. Mr. Howard of Doubleday said: "There's a lot of college-educated people in the country who encountered these classics when they were young and didn't have the worldly understanding to bring to their reading. Now maybe as adults these people are ambitious to test themselves against the work."

He said "Inferno" was selling well, particularly in independent stores, where it is often listed as a staff pick. In short, Doubleday will make back its investment in hardcover -- remember, there's no author advance, although lord knows what Dante would command in today's market -- and "then profits will come in two or three or four years as the paperback enters the college market." (Anchor Books, like Doubleday, is part of the Random House Inc. empire, and will be the paperback publisher.)

The thing to remember about the classics is that different aspects of a work emerge as important at different times, so there's never going to be one translation that stops everyone in their tracks and says, "This is it." Down the way someone will read the Hollanders and Seamus Heaney and say she or he wants to translate them all over, my way.

Source Citation

Arnold, Martin. "Why the classics are retranslated." *New York Times* 1 Feb. 2001: E3. *Student Resources In Context*. Web. 23 Sept. 2013.

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