Beowulf Told to the Children of the English Race, 1898-1908
Lise Jaillant, U of British Columbia/ Institute of Historical Research

1. Introduction
When publishers started marketing the tale of Beowulf to a large audience of children (and adults) in the 1880s, they capitalized on the aura of the Middle Ages by selling editions with golden titles, decorated initials and reproductions of medieval drawings. The medievalizing aspect of these children’s books offered a suitable format for a tale presented as the founding text in English literature. I argue that the heroic and nationalistic ideology of these early versions is anchored in their material aspect. The analysis of three juvenile adaptations first published between 1898 and 1908 – A. J. Church’s Heroes of Chivalry and Romance, Thomas Cartwright’s Brave Beowulf, and H. E. Marshall’s Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children – shows that their ‘bibliographic code’ was closely intertwined with archaic translations inspired by nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon scholarship.

2. A. J. Church’s Heroes of Chivalry and Romance (1898)
- Published in Britain by Seeley & Co and simultaneously in the US by Macmillan
- Sold to an audience of middle-class readers for the mid-range price of 5s. in Britain and $1.75 in the US
- Scholarly credentials: A. J. Church was a “former Professor of Latin in University College London” (Title-page) → inspired by the philologist John M. Kemble
- But wide audience of adults & children (appeal of coloured illustrations)
- Difficult language: archaic inversions, use of the pronouns ‘ye’ and ‘thou,’ revived inflections on the end of verbs
- Marketing an idealized past: heroism, but also mourning

3. Thomas Cartwright’s Brave Beowulf (1908)
- Published in Britain by Heinemann (Every Child’s Library) and in the US by Dutton
- Beowulf placed in the larger context of Germanic legends of the Middle Ages (see Cartwright’s Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, 1907)
- Presented as both fun and instructive (drawings, glossary)
- Young readers encouraged to relate to their heroic ancestors: “Brave Beowulf should be a prime favourite with Anglo-Saxon children all the world over”
- The only woman featured in the illustrations is Grendel’s mother → role of positive female characters downplayed

4. H. E. Marshall’s Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children (1908)
- Published in Britain by T. C. & E. C. Jack and in the US by Dutton
- Targeted very young children (Jack Told to the Children Series)
- Medievalizing packaging & language associated with a by long past
- Nationalistic pride closely intertwined with Marshall’s celebration of British imperial expansion (see Our Empire Story)
- Accentuation of the most striking elements: detailed description of the ogre, emphasis on the beauty of the queen

5. Conclusion: Contemporary Adaptations
- Recent retellings of Beowulf for children continue to show signs of the medieval in their bibliographic and linguistic codes
- Example #1: James Rumford’s Beowulf: A Hero’s Tale Retold (2007) → Gothic type and illuminations
- Uses only words that can be traced to their Anglo-Saxon origins
- Example #2: 2007 retelling of Beowulf by Gareth Hinds (2 editions)
- The Candlewick Press edition uses what the author describes as ‘a more straightforward prose translation by A. J. Church’
- The self-published edition draws on ‘a more archaically-flavored verse translation’
- Beowulf is still tied to history, archaeology, and the search for origins

6. Further Readings