Hwæt! How We Have Heard Tales Sung: How Nineteenth-Century Translation Constructs Hyper-Aggressive Masculine Identities in *Beowulf*

Rosemary Kelly

Independent Scholar

This paper discusses some of the earliest Modern English translations of Beowulf *to assess how these authors have affected scholarship surrounding masculinity. By assessing the violent and emotional elements of early Victorian translation, I am able to unveil how English nationalism is injected into the poem wherever possible. Such behaviours have been carried forth as the pinnacle of Anglo-Saxon or Germanic masculinity, with little room left to assess the contradicting behaviours such as Hrothgar's shedding of tears or his settlement of feuds with gold instead of brute force. By conducting a close reading of the selected translations, namely John Mitchell Kemble and Benjamin Thorpe, I can identify elements of masculine-coded behaviours that translators have attempted to alter in order to construct a more consistently violent rhetoric in critical male characters, such as Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Wiglaf. This has had a profound effect on scholarship which, until the 1990s, excluded any major studies of masculinity, having been deemed too obvious to merit attention. By considering translation choices, we can further explore how masculinity is constructed within the poem and how these choices shape such identities. These translations are compared to one another using Bosworth-Toller online, as, by using a dictionary that was first published in the nineteenth-century, we can contrast translation choices within the confines of their contemporaries where possible, revealing the translators' own self-interests and political ideologies that continue to bleed into twenty-first-century reception and scholarship.*

The Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*, opens with an introduction to a world of warriors and noble men, a world of *þeod-cyninga* (high kings) in *gear-dagum* (days long past). Germanic heroism has traditionally been defined by this noble warrior culture, with such an identity established through acts of violence and aggression. Coupled with this, Germanic heroism has also long been understood as a strictly male culture, particularly in texts such as *Beowulf*. Gillian Overing describes *Beowulf* as 'an overwhelmingly masculine poem; it could be seen as a chronicle of male desire, a tale of men dying'.[1] Despite men playing such a vital role in the poem's structure and narrative, masculinity has remained a greatly understudied avenue within Old English literary scholarship, with the earliest studies originating in the 1990s, influenced by the feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s.[2] Clare A. Lees states that such work 'helps revise the emphasis on "hegemonic" males – the kings, princes, and lawmakers … that can obscure the rich and varied evidence for men's history in ways similar to … the silencing of women's history'.[3] We can go as far as to say, following Mary Dockray-Miller, that it is only now that we are even considering men to be gendered beings in Old English literature rather than a universal default.[4] While the poem undeniably focuses on the actions of such significant, noble men, including the eponymous hero himself, our perception of the diversity of these noble social roles

---

[1] Gillian Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1990), p. 70.

[2] Thelma Fenster, 'Preface: Why Men?', in *Men and Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. ix–xiii (p. xi).

[3] Clare A. Lees, 'Introduction', in *Men and Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. xv–xxvi (p. xv).

[4] Mary Dockray-Miller, 'Beowulf's Tears of Fatherhood', *Exemplaria*, 10 (1998), 1–28 (p. 2).

embodied within has been greatly influenced by the cultures and politics of the nineteenth century, when studies of Old English literature first took root. Reception and translation, originating out of scholarship that overlapped with these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century politics, has created a dominating sameness in masculine identity: kings have been placed parallel to warriors, resulting in an audience that expects violent behaviour to be central to *all* aspects of culture and identity in *Beowulf*. Such scholarly domination has been carried forth into the twenty-first century. This essay will examine three of the earliest translations of *Beowulf* and focus on the core male characters within the text. These translations are that of John Mitchell Kemble, published in 1837; Diedrich A. Wackerbarth, first published in 1849; and Benjamin Thorpe, published in 1855. These will be contrasted with R.D. Fulk's translation from *The Beowulf Manuscript*, published in 2010, as a twenty-first century comparison. A close reading of each translation will demonstrate how these translators use violence to establish overlapping aggressive masculinity in core figures such as Hrothgar, Beowulf, and Wiglaf, regardless of the social role inhibited by each one. This method will also be used to illustrate how the poem exhibits variations across gendered identities and social roles, creating, as argued by Lees, pluralised masculinities as opposed to a singular, dominating form idealised by these translations.

While antiquarians began collecting valuable Old English manuscripts in the sixteenth century, after the dissolution of monastic libraries, the earliest references to the study of such literature and its language date to the seventeenth century when William Somner, in 1659, completed the first dictionary of Old English – *Dictionarium*

Saxonico-Latino-Anglicum – referring to the language as 'Anglo-Saxon'.[5] Somner's dictionary became a staple tool for teaching at Oxford University until the publication of a new dictionary by Joseph Bosworth in 1838. While the earliest studies of Old English literature took root during the Reformation, its popularity in scholarship grew exponentially in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries alongside a fresh rise in English nationalism following the Napoleonic wars. This 'aggressive nationalism', as described by Tom Shippey, featured heavily in the work of early scholars and translators. This nationalist interest, in what has since been dubbed Anglo-Saxonism, did not stay within the confines of academia but also extended into the popular culture of the time. Numerous Anglo-Saxon-inspired novels were published, including Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819). Joanne Parker writes that 'the Anglo-Saxon novels were not merely products of a long tradition of Anglo-Saxonism – they were also written in response to specific social and cultural developments'.[6]

Such a lengthy wave of reception, overlapping with the political, social, and cultural developments of the time, inevitably shaped the scholarship that was to come, including that of historian Sharon Turner, whose *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* (written 1799–1805) gained immense popularity and ran for several editions. Turner's work was not only cited in *Ivanhoe* and John Mitchell Kemble's 1837 edition of *Beowulf*, the first full English translation of *Beowulf*, but was also referenced frequently in

---

[5] David C. Douglas, *English Scholars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), p. 66

[6] Joanne Parker, 'Anglo-Saxonism and the Victorian Novel', in *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism,* ed. by Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 632–53 (p. 636).

emerging nineteenth-century theories of racial supremacism.[7] Turner wrote that 'our language, our government, and our laws, display our Gothic ancestors in every part'.[8] Inevitably, interpretations of heroic masculinity are then underscored by such late-Georgian and early-Victorian medievalism, presenting and celebrating it in the form of dominating violence and imperialism. In 1897, Prosser Hall Fyre wrote that 'one of the most marked characteristics of the modern translation of *Beowulf* is the tendency to retain as many distinctive Anglo-Saxon peculiarities as possible'.[9] In his essay 'The Middle Ages as Property: *Beowulf*, Translation, and the Ghosts of Nationalism', Joshua Davies argues that '*Beowulf* was identified as the property of a variety of nations and peoples. It was the subject of claims and counterclaims, and all the litigants agreed that, whomever the poem might belonged to, it revealed important properties of their identity'.[10] This points to the underlying purpose of Victorian translation and scholarship. It becomes less of an attempt to understand the past and more of an overt subjugation of history and literary texts in order to find a supreme, white identity within. As Will Abberley writes: 'Victorian philology acted as a vehicle for contrasting visions of national heritage in England. Romantic ideas of language expressing national character seemed to render philology a way of discovering a people's

---

[7] Reginald Horsman, 'Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976), 387–410 (p. 394).

[8] Sharon Turner, *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (Paris, 1840), p. 2.

[9] Prosser Hall Fyre, 'The Translation of Beowulf', *Modern Language Notes*, 12.3 (1897), 79–82 (p. 79).

[10] Joshua Davies, 'The Middle Ages as Property: *Beowulf*, Translation, and the Ghosts of Nationalism', *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, 10.2 (2019), 137–50 (p. 139).

collective spirit through history'.[11]

Upon publishing his dictionary of Anglo-Saxon words, Joseph Bosworth encouraged his readers to acquaint themselves with this medieval language and claimed that it spoke to the 'race instincts' of their ancestry, believing this to be critical to their national identity as English people. He stated that '[e]very Englishman who glories in the vigour of his Father-land – who would clearly understand, and feel the full force of his mother tongue, ought to study Anglo-Saxon'.[12] Both translators and influenced authors alike would flock to Old English literature and language. In 1841, Thomas Arnold, one of the first of many men to translate *Beowulf* into Modern English, stated that 'our English race is the German race, for though our Norman forefathers had learnt to speak a stranger's language, yet in blood, as we know, they were the Saxons' brethren'.[13] In *Ivanhoe*, Walter Scott claimed that Old English or Anglo-Saxon was 'far more manly and expressive' than the language of the Norman conquerors.[14] These scholars and authors remained nostalgic for a time when England was allegedly racially pure. This push for racial purity was evident in the careers and discourse of many scholars. This reception of Old English literature and language as 'more manly' than other languages, including modern English, has continued to pervade our own perceptions of masculinity today, seeping deeply into the treatment of men in

---

[11] Will Abblerley, 'Philology, Anglo-Saxonism, and National Identity', in *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. by Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 326–39 (p. 327).

[12] Joshua Bosworth, *A Compendius Anglo-Saxon and English Dictionary* (London, 1848), pp. iii–iv.

[13] Thomas Arnold, *Introductory Lectures on Modern History* (London, 1849), p. 26.

[14] Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe: A Romance* (Edinburgh, 1820), p. 5.

translation, adaptation, and scholarship.

Beowulf's opening lines introduce the royal line of the Scyld Danes, led by Hrothgar's ancestor, Scyld Scefing. To refer to Fulk's translation, Scyld is introduced as a leader who 'made men fear him'. The poem opens with these Old English lines:

> Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum
>
> monegum mægþum meado-setla ofteah,
>
> egsode eorlas, syððan ærest wearð
>
> fea-sceaft funden.
>
> (Often Scyld, son of Scef, expelled opponents' hosts, many peoples, from mead-
>
> seats, made men fear him, after he was first discovered destitute).[15]

In contrast, Wackerbarth chooses to translate these same lines as the following:

> (Oft Scyld, the son of Scéf, from Bands
>
> Of foemen, drawn from numerous Lands,
>
> The Mead-thrones tare away;
>
> For Dread hecast on all around
>
> Sith he was first an Out-cast found)[16]

In the preface to his translation, Wackerbarth writes 'I wish to get my book read, that my countrymen may become generally acquainted with the epic of our ancestors',[17]

---

[15] R.D. Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 87; ll. 4–7.

[16] Diedrich Wackerbarth, *Beowulf: An Epic Poem* (London, 1849), p. 1.

[17] Wackerbarth, *Beowulf*, p. ix.

immediately placing English nationalism alongside Old English scholarship and translation. He presents the poem as fundamental to the interests and ideology of English nationalism. Considering this alongside his translation of the poem's opening lines, we can see how the emotional impact of the term *egsode* (fear) is thus lessened, as he defines this as 'dread' instead of 'fear'. Coupled with this is his translation of '*sceaþena þreatum*' as 'from bands of foeman …/ mead thrones tare away'. This 'tare away' represents the violent methods of subjugation undertaken by rulers such as Scyld, resulting in the *egsode* (fear) that these tribes feel. For many of the men facing this violence, their emotions must have a viable reason to exist, and even then, can only exist within a more limited scope, in order to adhere to a rigidly strict form of heroic masculinity, as is expected of males in *Beowulf*. In the case of Scyld's foes, they must, therefore, be at fault for feeling such unmasculine fear. However, *sceaþena*, a verb, is defined in Bosworth-Toller's dictionary as 'to hurt, harm, spoil, or rob',[18] with *þreatum* being troop, band, or crowd.[19] The poem follows '*sceaþena þreatum*' by describing said troop as '*monegum mægþum*' or 'many people', which is replaced by Wackerbarth, who instead translates this as 'drawn from numerous lands'. He places foreign nationality within the confines of justified violence – to be foreign is to be an enemy – and thus plants his translation neatly into the colonial and racial ideologies of the nineteenth century. The adaptation of translation in order to fit within the

---

[18] An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online (ASD), s.v. *sceaþian* https://bosworthtoller.com/. Accessed 27 February 2023.
[19] ASD s.v. *þreát*.

cultural and political expectations of the nineteenth century is a recurring theme throughout these translations, and one that has limited the scope of identity within critical male characters in the poem.

Let us also consider Kemble's translation. He translates '*egsode eorlas*' as 'the earl terrified them' but couples this with his addition of 'flourished with dignities'.[20] While he has a more accurate translation of *egsode* (fear) with his use of the word 'terrified', he also negates the emotions felt by Scyld's enemies through his use of the phrase 'flourished with dignities'. Similar to Wackerbarth, the opening lines of Kemble's translation use pivotal, violent moments as a tool in constructing a masculine leadership-based identity. To be masculine is to be dominant, and both Wackerbarth and Kemble depict this through portrayals of fear. Fear must either be altered or justified in order to construct a positive male role model within the opening lines of the text. Benjamin Thorpe translates these same opening lines as 'from bands of robbers / from many tribes / their mead benches drag'd away / inspired earls with fear'.[21] He, therefore, paints Scyld's enemies in a negative light by portraying them as 'robbers'. Again, foreign nationality is linked with negativity in order to justify Scyld's violent subjugation of these people who, in turn, have to pay a financial tribute to him. This falls in line with the British colonial action of the time, having gained control of India in 1757, with direct rule beginning in 1858. Translations either support or

---

[20] John Mitchell Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf, The Travellers [Widsið], and the Battle of Finnesburh* (London, 1833–37), p. 1.
[21] Benjamin Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf: The Scôp Or Gleeman's Tale, and the Fight at Finnesburg* (London, 1889), p. 1.

criticise Scyld's subjugation of neighbouring kingdoms, but nineteenth-century translations in particular choose to celebrate such behaviour.

This sets a precedence of expectations concerning kingly behaviour, and this discourse is further entrenched through Scyld's son, Beow.[22] The poet states that Beow's 'blæd wide sprang' (fame sprang wide) and that 'swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean / fromum feoh-giftum' (so shall a young man subjugate from money-gifts).[23] Kemble translates this line as 'so shall a war-prince work with benefits, with prudent gifts of money'.[24] To offset the peaceful nature of sharing one's wealth, Kemble chooses to gloss *geong guma* as 'war-prince'. To be noble is to be violent in nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonism and is a recurring theme concerning kings in this text. Even though we frequently see such peaceful actions in *Beowulf*, namely through King Hrothgar, where possible, Kemble elects to inject violence where there is little to be found, making this a core aspect of masculine identity within the poem.

The definition of heroic masculinity as deriving from violent action can run into difficulty in the case of King Hrothgar, who modern critics have frequently described as 'emasculated' regarding his recurring bouts of emotion, particularly his scenes of open weeping. Jillian Hoffman argues that Hrothgar, despite being a 'complex case', is 'emasculated in his reaction' to the death of his loyal scop Æschere, who is

---

[22] Beow is called *Beowulf* in the Old English poem. However, some editors have chosen to shorten his name to Beow to ease confusion for readers, as this is not the monster-fighting warrior we meet some lines later.

[23] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 18, 20–1.

[24] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 2.

murdered by Grendel's Mother in an act of revenge.[25] As we have previously seen in

the poem's opening lines, emotions, particularly grief and fear, have a recurring role

to play alongside episodes of masculine violence, feuding, and politics. J.M. Hill

argues that emotion, especially grief, is the driving force behind revenge acts in

Beowulf, describing the hero himself as 'grief-enraged'.[26] Despite the heavy presence

of grief and the open expression of such emotions by numerous male characters, there

has been little discussion of said emotions in scholarship until recent years. In

addition, the early discourse regarding emotions in the text has argued that grief is a

distinctly feminine role within the poem. Kristen Mills writes that both 'Victorian and

modern views on masculinity have influence the critical reception and interpretation

of male tears in the corpus of Old English literature'.[27] Consequently, these are either

'ignored or deemed aberrant'.[28] Scholarship has frequently associated grief and

gender together, leaving little room for the consideration of male grief in the poem,

which arguably happens as often, if not more often, than female grief. Robin Norris

writes in her essay 'Sad Men in *Beowulf*' that 'the ink spilled defining weeping as

women's work in *Beowulf* far exceeds the volume of their tears'.[29] However, words

such as *sorgian* (to care, to sorrow, to grieve, or be anxious) and *sorh* (care, anxiety,

---

[25] Jillian Hoffman, 'Beowulf's Missing Mother: Beowulf's Relationships with Family, Women, and His Own Gender', *Furman Humanities Review*, 31 (2020), 49–68.

[26] J.M. Hill, *The Narrative Pulse of Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

[27] Kristen Mills, 'Emotion and Gesture in Hroðgar's Farewell', in *Anglo-Saxon Emotions: Reading the Heart in Old English Language, Literature and Culture*, ed. by Alice Jorgensen, Frances McCormack, and Jonathan Wilcox (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 163–75 (p. 166).

[28] Kristen Mills, 'Emotion and Gesture', p. 166.

[29] Robin Norris, 'Sad Men in Beowulf', in *Dating Beowulf: Studies in Intimacy*, ed. by Daniel C. Remein, and Erica Weaver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 210–26 (p. 210).

sorrow, grief, affliction, or trouble) occur nineteen times in *Beowulf*, while specific references to mourning, weeping, and grieving occur forty-six times throughout the epic, and the majority of these occur in relation to male characters in the poem. Despite this, the expression of male emotion, particularly sadness or grief, has been frequently glossed as emasculating or otherwise negative, with particular emphasis placed on the stormy moods of Heremod, a past Danish king whose story is told during a post-Grendel kin feast.

Hrothgar himself, the fourth generation in this line of Danes, is introduced as being 'here-sped gygen wiges weorð-mynd, þæt him his wine-magas georne hyrdon' (given war-success, distinction in battle, so that his friends and kinsmen were willingly ruled by him).[30] Kemble translates these lines as follows: 'Then was success in arms given to Hrothgar, the dignity of war; so that his dear relations gladly obeyed him'.[31] The poet uses *weorð-mynd*, defined in Bosworth-Toller's dictionary as 'honour, glory, fame' or 'honour, dignity, honourable position in office'.[32] However, Kemble chooses to describe this term as 'the dignity of war', normalising any recurring war, feuding, and violence. It is transformed from the mere praising of skills to a broader praising of war and its accompanying acts of violence and subjugation in order to maintain Hrothgar's presence as a militantly masculine figure. Thorpe translates these same lines as:

---

[30] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 64–5.

[31] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 4.

[32] ASD s.v. *weorþ-mynd*.

Then was to Hrothgar

martial prowess given,

warlike glory,

so that him his dear kinsmen,

willingly obey'd.[33]

Like his ancestor Scyld, Hrothgar earns his position through violent acts. The traditional definition of Anglo-Saxon or early medieval masculinity has been based on this opening portion of the poem. However, Hrothgar's behaviour changes upon becoming king, a point that has been frequently excluded from discussions concerning his masculine status. Like his ancestor Beow, Hrothgar elects to reward his kinsmen by building the great mead hall, Heorot. Upon Beowulf's arrival in Denmark, the reader learns that Hrothgar has often settled past feuds using gold. Hrothgar greets Beowulf by stating that 'Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste [...] Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode' (Your father caused the greatest vendetta [...] I settled that feud with payment).[34] In this portion of the poem, the poet reveals how murder and blood feuds can be an unnecessary and even negative choice on behalf of leaders, with Hrothgar reminding Beowulf that this warrior's own father, Ecgtheow, was bailed out of a feud. The poem states the following on Ecgtheow's own violence: 'wearþ he Heaþolafe to hand-bonan / mid Wilfingum; ða hine Wedera cyn for here-brogan habban ne mihte'

---

[33] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, pp. 5–6

[34] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 459, 470.

(he came to be the killer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings; then for fear of war the nation of Weders could not keep him).[35]

Erin Sebo argues that 'emotion, as much as anything else, seems to underpin even the drive for honour in revenge'.[36] Hrothgar elects to prevent war among other nations by paying the affected tribes with his own personal wealth, a stark difference to his ancestor Scyld, who received tribute from the foes he subjugated. When Grendel attacks Heorot, the poet states that Grendel 'sibbe ne wolde wið manna hwone mægnes Deniga, feorh-bealo feorran, fea þingian' (wanted no truce with any of the men of the force of the Danes, or to put aside all the killing, negotiate a settlement).[37] Kemble translates this line as 'the life-destroyer would not for ransom establish peace'. Here, he is translating *fea þingian* as 'ransom', while Bosworth-Toller defines *fea* as 'fee, money, goods' and *þingian* as 'to intercede' or 'ask favour' (fee-favour, or money-favour, perhaps). Kemble places a seemingly alluring nature on this gold settlement, despite it appearing to be a routine decision for the well-seasoned Hrothgar. Peaceful leadership appears to be normalised concerning Hrothgar, whom the poet repeatedly states is a *god cyning* (good king). Though this appears to be the present and perhaps future of leadership or kingship, translators elect to correct this in order to fit the militant masculine image they themselves want to construct. Consider how Thorpe

---

[35] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript,* ll. 460–2.

[36] Erin Sebo, 'Ne Sorga: Grief and Revenge in *Beowulf*', in *Anglo-Saxon Emotions: Reading the Heart in Old English Language, Literature and Culture,* ed. by Alice Jorgensen, Frances McCormack, and Jonathan Wilcox (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 177–92 (p. 191).

[37] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 154–6.

translates these same lines:

> Peace would not have,
>
> with any man
>
> of the Danes' power,
>
> or mortal bale withdraw
>
> with money compromise.[38]

Here, Thorpe describes this peace fee as a 'compromise'. Again, the option for a peaceful settlement of feuds is positioned in a more shameful or negative manner in contrast to how the Old English text has described it, giving the reader the impression of a preference for violent outcomes. Following the tone of these translations, truly masculine kings would not attempt to do politics with Grendel as Hrothgar initially attempts. Concerning the settlement of Ecgtheow's feud, Kemble translates this portion as: 'Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste ... Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode' (Thy father avenged by striking, the mightiest of feuds … afterwards I appeased the feud with money).[39] Rather than causing the feud, Ecgtheow is now deemed the avenger of feuds in an attempt to erase the negative criticism towards his past actions.

Indeed, Ecgtheow's behaviours fit better with the constructed, dominative image of masculinity that Kemble creates with his translation than Hrothgar does with his peace-seeking gold settlements. Ecgtheow, like Scyld Scefing, is the picture of

---

[38] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf,* p. 11.

[39] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf,* p. 20.

militant masculinity and has been painted in translation with nationalist undertones and intentions. In its description of Ecgtheow, the Old English text uses *fæhðe*, defined in Bosworth-Toller as 'feud'; *mæste*, defined as 'most, chiefly, especially'; and *gesloh*, the conjugated form of the verb *ge-slean* and defined in Bosworth-Toller as 'to strike'. The poet is therefore emphasising the atrocious nature of Ecgtheow's actions; however, since Kemble and others seek to normalise such violence as the pinnacle of positive masculine leadership, they translate the text to be forgiving of Ecgtheow's actions which simultaneously weakens Hrothgar, pinning him as seemingly passive in his kingship. Though Hrothgar has moments of violence pre-kingship, Hrothgar's string of violence appears to end when he becomes king, as throughout Grendel's attacks and later when Grendel's Mother appears he does not physically fight back, and translators such as Kemble have elected to minimise the strength of such peaceful leadership where possible. Grendel causes the 'hæleð wean' (wise hero) much distress, leaving him brooding over his trouble. The poet states that Hrothgar 'ne mihte snotor hæleð / wean onwendan; wæs þæt gewin to swyð / laþ ond longsum' (could not set aside his sorrow – that conflict was too forceful, ugly, and enduring).[40] After the death of Grendel at the hands of Beowulf, Hrothgar has but one night to celebrate with joy before death is yet again on his doorstep. This seemingly never-ending loss of life in Hrothgar's kingdom results in such persistent *sorh* (sorrow) and grief. The poem greatly emphasises the distress that Hrothgar experiences and

---

[40] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 190–91.

couples this with reminders of the king's *god* (good) nature and leadership. Kemble

translates this portion of Hrothgar's distress as follows:

> ne mihte snotor hæleð
>
> wean onwendan; wæs þæt gewin to swyð
>
> laþ ond longsum
>
> (continually seethed the sorrow of the time; nor might the prudent hero
>
> turn away the ruin; the struggle was too strong, loathly, and tedious).[41]

Again, Kemble twists the emotions expressed by Hrothgar wherever possible. He

adds the word 'seethed' alongside 'sorrow' in order to offset tears in exchange for

anger and aggression. Rage, anger, and fury are deemed acceptable emotions for a

militant masculine character to openly display, while sadness and despair are not,

despite the recurring use of terms such as *wean* (sorrow or misery) in the Old English

text. Alongside each emotion, Kemble inserts a reference to the violent achievements

of Hrothgar's past, seemingly attempting to balance the depth of this *wean* (sorrow or

misery) and *egsode* (fear) in order to preserve the aggressive and militant masculinity

prescribed to leaders in the opening lines of the poem. For example, the line that

follows states: 'swa ða mæl-ceare maga Healfdenes', with Kemble stating that

Hrothgar sat 'broken in spirit, the powerful one, in council'.[42] *Maga* is defined in

---

[41] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf,* p. 9.
[42] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf,* p. 8.

Bosworth-Toller as meaning both 'powerful' and 'a relative, a son, a man'.[43] This term is used alongside *Healfdenes*, referring to Hrothgar's father, Healfdene, with the genitive -es ending. Therefore, this refers to Hrothgar as 'Healfdene's son', though Kemble elects to describe Hrothgar as the 'powerful one' instead. The text also refers to Hrothgar as 'wine Scyldinga / modes brecða' (friend of the Scyldings, a cause of broken spirits).[44] *Modes*, a declined form of the neuter noun *mod*, is defined in Bosworth-Toller as 'the inner man, the spiritual as opposed to the bodily part of the man',[45] with *brecða* meaning 'a broken state, fracture, used figuratively of mental contrition'.[46] The *Beowulf* poet makes clear reference here to the grief Hrothgar experiences, with translators, such as Kemble, choosing to gloss over these emotions where possible. Where Kemble cannot entirely skip, he elects to place them alongside violence or a violent reputation, a recurring issue in his translation of the poem. Nor does Thorpe's translation greatly differ; he chooses to translate this same section as:

> ne mihte snotor hæleð
>
> wean onwendan; wæs þæt gewin to swyð
>
> laþ ond longsum
>
> (in spirit broken, / many a time sat, / the powerful one in deliberation and constantly seeth'd; /
>
> the sagacious hero could not / the calamity avert).[47]

---

[43] ASD s.v. *mága*.

[44] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 170–1.

[45] ASD s.v. *mód*.

[46] ASD s.v. *brecþ*.

[47] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, pp. 13–4.

Like Kemble, Thorpe chooses to remind the reader of Hrothgar's prowess and might through the use of 'powerful one' and replaces his distress with 'constantly seeth'd', thus displacing any unsavoury emotions with more suitably masculine ones. Kristen Mills states that the 'desire to claim and control the Anglo-Saxon past is paralleled by, and rooted in, nineteenth-century discourses about gender, emotion, and culture'.[48] As a consequence of such influences, masculinity has been heavily defined through the lens of these discourses, with translation electing to correct, gloss over, or erase elements of the poem that may complicate the nature of identity, gender, and social boundaries. This is clear through the translation choices seen so far in Kemble and Thorpe. Kemble chooses to insert further references to Hrothgar's past as a gifted warrior, referring back to the power that he and past Danes have held in contrast to surrounding kingdoms, in order to balance out pesky emotions that cannot be fully contained. Thorpe refers back to Hrothgar's wisdom in his decision-making through the use of a 'sagacious hero'. However, he, too, has reminded the reader of Hrothgar's violent past with this use of 'powerful one' in his translation.

After Beowulf's successful battling of the Grendel-kin and the follow-up feasting, it is time for the eponymous hero to depart from Denmark and return home. Despite the memorable deeds that have occurred, Hrothgar is deeply saddened, knowing he is unlikely to see Beowulf again. The Old English poem states, 'hrunon him tearas / blonden-feaxum' (the grey-haired one dropped tears) and '[w]æs him se

---

[48] Kristen Mills, '"Phil-Fog" Celts, Theorists, and the Other "Others"', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality,* 53 (2017), 73–88 (p. 77).

man to þon leof þæt he þone breost-wylm forberan ne mehte' (the man was so dear to him that he could not suppress the turmoil in his breast).[49] The poet uses *tearas* (tears) and *breost-wylm*, which together are defined by Bosworth-Toller as 'emotion of the breast' and translated by Fulk as 'turmoil in his breast'.[50] Kemble translates this first line as 'tears fell from the mingle-haired one, old and inform he was'.[51] At this point, Kemble has chosen to swap out an emphasis on Hrothgar's military prowess in favour of a more frail and fragile depiction. The poet describes Hrothgar as *infrodum*, which is defined by Bosworth-Toller as 'very old, very wise'. If such emotional expressions cannot be entirely avoided, then Kemble chooses to downplay Hrothgar's character entirely, his wisdom now replaced with a loss of his past prowess. He has become, in Kemble's eyes, an unmasculine leader in his old age. Thorpe chooses to translate these lines as 'tears fell from him / the grizzly hair'd prince' and describes Hrothgar as 'the old sage'.[52] Finally, Thorpe closes off Hrothgar's section of the poem with 'that was a king, in everything faultless'.[53] The choices made in these translations are subtle, but they have resulted in a greater emphasis being placed on violence as the dominant face of masculine identity in the poem. Where possible, these authors elect to emphasise the reputations built by violent action.

---

[49] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 1872–3, 1876–7.

[50] ASD s.v. *breóst-wylm*.

[51] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 76.

[52] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 125

[53] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 125

This is not to argue that all expressions of emotion within the original poem are positively and socially accepted like Hrothgar's; in the case of Heremod, it is, in fact, the opposite. The poem states that 'hine sorh-wylmas lemedon to lange' (seething discontent hobbled him for too long), with Heremod becoming a 'leodum wearð, eallum æþellingum to aldor-ceare' (a mortal affliction to his nation, all his nobles).[54] Kemble translates these lines as: 'him the waves of sorrow too long oppressed: he became a fatal care unto his people, unto his nobles'.[55] Interestingly, Kemble chooses not to name Heremod specifically. Instead, the ambiguity of this portion of the text caters solely around another named hero, Sigemund. Thorpe elects to name Heremod, translating these same lines as 'him sorrow's boilings / had too long afflicted; / to his people he became, / to all his nobles, / a life-long care'.[56] In both instances, these authors do not hesitate to directly translate *sorh-wylmas* as sorrow. *Sorh* is characterised in Bosworth-Toller as 'care, anxiety' or 'sorrow, grief, affliction, trouble'.[57] *Wylmas* is a suffix that appears in various Old English terms that refer to emotions and is used to emphasise the afflicting nature of such turbulent emotional experiences. In these scenarios, due to the nature of his downfall, both Thorpe and Kemble do not hesitate to openly translate these lines in reference to the negative or stormy moods that Heremod displays, both in and out of war. He is exiled by his people, doomed to a fate of violent death, in order to preserve the kingdom and people

---

[54] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 904–6.

[55] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 38.

[56] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, pp. 60–1.

[57] ASD s.v. *sorh*.

as a whole. Where Heremod and Hrothgar differ are the choices they make as leaders and the impact their choices have on their own people. While both kings experience turbulent moods, such as grief and wrath, it is their choices as leaders that define their reputation. The poet repeatedly states that Hrothgar *wæs god cyning* (was a good king). As Hrothgar is repeatedly shown in a positive and complimentary light by the poet, Kemble and Thorpe thus elect to balance these emotions with reference to his past might as a warrior seemingly proving his goodness. Whereas, regarding Heremod, they instead choose to openly maintain his tempestuous moods in their translations; for example, Heremod is visibly depressed within the text, as maintained by the Old English through the use of *sorh-wylmas*. Therefore, both authors preserve an image of strong and positive masculine leaders expressing only the emotions deemed acceptable for men: anger, wrath, or rage.

Beowulf is also not exempt from this translation-based construction of militant masculinity. Despite a heavy emphasis on Beowulf's physical prowess both in scholarship and several instances within the poem itself, such as his battles against the Grendel-kin, the poet also provides plentiful examples of Beowulf as an equally emotional king, like Heremod and Hrothgar. After Beowulf's departure from Denmark he, at a later point in life, becomes king of the Geats, with the poet stating he ruled for fifty years. Late into his reign, a deadly dragon awakens from its slumber within a nearby barrow, causing death and destruction in his wake. Beowulf, despite being king, chooses to fight this dragon and take its gold hoard for both his people and his own glory. It is this final monster battle that results in the now-aged king's

demise, with catastrophic results for the people he rules. The awakening of the dragon leaves Beowulf in a mournful mood; the aged king now finally parallel to Hrothgar, whose sorrow the reader witnessed in the earlier portions of the poem. Unlike Hrothgar, however, Beowulf will take it upon himself to do battle with this dragon, with a seeming awareness that he will not survive this fight. The poet states that, 'him wæs geomar sefa, wæfre ond wæl-fus, wyrd ungemete neah' (his mood was mournful, restless and ready for death, his destiny incalculably near).[58] *Geomor* is defined by Bosworth-Toller as 'expressing sadness, melancholy' or 'having a cheerless sound or appearance', with *wæl-fus* meaning literally 'prepared for death in battle'.[59] Thorpe translates this portion as 'his mind was sad, / wandering and death-bound'. However, despite being truer to the text in these lines, it is important to remember Beowulf has made a choice in directly battling the dragon. This is opposed to the treatment of Hrothgar, who does not directly fight the Grendel-kin when they who reject any attempts at a gold settlement from the aged king.

Beowulf's grief towards his own inevitable death appears to be acceptable as a predecessor to his violent action. Thorpe approves of Beowulf's sad and wandering mind, knowing that violence is inevitable, while Hrothgar never picks up the sword while king in this poem. The poet themself appears to take on a tone of criticism towards Beowulf's actions, having left no heir for the Geats despite the apparent knowledge of his approaching death. The Old English poet states that '[n]æs ða long

---

[58] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 2419–20.
[59] ASD s.v *geómor*.

to ðon þæt ða æglcean hy eft gemetton' (It was not long then till the troublemakers met again).[60] Here, the poet places Beowulf in the same light as the dragon, reflecting this negativity through the hero's potential breach of social boundaries. Herbert G. Wright argues that while the poet concedes that a wrong has been conducted in the plundering of his gold hoard, 'one could not ignore the appropriation of by the dragon of a hoard which had once belonged to the human race' and 'ethnically there is no claim and therefore no grievance'.[61] However, this also implies that the plundering gold from its previous owners is indeed a grievance; in this case, Wright appears to argue that while the dragon has no claim over such a hoard, this still does not give Beowulf a claim to the treasure. In the beginning of the poem, Scyld Scefing strikes fear into his neighbours, resulting in them paying him gold in exchange for peace. In this case, the build-up of wealth through violent means is the offence, applying to both dragon and warriors alike. Beowulf himself fought Geatish feuds prior to becoming king. He states in a speech that he 'him þa maðmas þe he me sealde geald æt guðe' (repaid in battle the treasures he had given me).[62] Beowulf becomes a symbol of the complexities and inevitable breaches in social boundaries that occur within this mythic age of heroes; while he often reflects fondly on the violent acts that constructed his reputation, he cannot let go of such a past. While such an interpretation is possible within Fulk's translation, Kemble and Thorpe both elect to remind their audience of

---

[60] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 2591–2.

[61] Herbert G. Wright, 'Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in *Beowulf*', *Review of English Studies,* 8 (1957), 1–11 (p. 1).

[62] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 2490–1.

the eponymous hero's warrior reputation as often as possible, thus idolising violence and imperialist action.

However, the emotions felt by Beowulf are not enough to prevent the hero from crossing the implied social boundaries as an aged king with no heir, who elects to relive his youth through reminiscent speech and violent action. Beowulf, throughout the poem and within this episode in particular, presents himself as the ultimate embodiment of militant masculinity. Indeed, the ending of the poem goes on to reveal how militant masculinity can carry consequences. Early in the poem, upon the building of Hrothgar's great mead hall, Heorot, the poet states:

> sele hlifade
>
> heah ond horngeap; heathowylma bad,
>
> lathan liges; ne waes hit lenge þa gen,
>
> þaet se ecghete athumsweoran
>
> aefter waelnithe waecnan scolde.
>
> (it awaited battle-surges, dreaded flame; it was sooner yet that the blade hostility
>
> should be roused for father- and son-in-law after deadly violence).[63]

The poet warns the audience of Heorot's inevitable future demise due to violent feuding. Despite Hrothgar becoming a king that represents peace through his use of gold settlements, his descendants will not follow this custom, with detrimental results. The poet appears to criticise unwarranted violence through the use of these

---

[63] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 81–6.

consequences; an image conjured once more at the end of the poem with Beowulf's fateful fight against the dragon. When Beowulf is alerted to the damage that the dragon wreaked upon Geatish homes, Beowulf feels a deep 'hreow on hreðre, hyge-sorga mæst' (heartfelt distress, the severest of mental affliction).[64] Bosworth-Toller defines *hreow* as 'sorrow, regret, [...] repentance', while *hyge-sorga* is defined as 'mental care, anxiety' (though *sorh* alone can also refer to grief and sorrow as discussed earlier).[65] The poet further states that such mental affliction, which he further defined as 'þeostrum geþoncum' (dark thoughts), was 'swa him geþywe ne wæs' (not usual for him). Kemble translates these lines as:

> that was to the good prince savage in his bosom, the greatest of mental sorrows: the prince
>
> thought that he should be bitterly angry with the almighty, with the eternal lord, contrary
>
> to old right; his breast boiled within dark thoughts, in a manner such as befitted him not.[66]

While the poet frames Beowulf as wondering whether he has enraged God, Kemble flips this to push the anger onto the warrior. As seen with Hrothgar's emotional episodes, Beowulf's sorrow is balanced out as rage, a seeming correction to match the militant masculine persona built by his violent past and reputation. Every leader has his emotions injected with anger, with the translator editing out any possibility of a rueful or mournful king in these last scenes. Thorpe translates this same section as:

---

[64] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, l. 2328.

[65] ASD s.v. *hyge-sorh*.

[66] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf,* p. 94.

That to the good prince was

grievous in mind,

of mental sorrows greatest:

the wise chief ween'd

that he with the Almighty

against all right

with the eternal Lord

should be bitterly incens'd:

his breast boil'd within

with dark thoughts,

as it was not befitting him.[67]

While Thorpe translates *hreow* as 'grievous', he too also flips *bitre gebulge*, which is

defined in Bosworth-Toller as bitterly angered, from *gebelgan* 'to make one angry', in

order to have Beowulf as the offended one.[68] In the eyes of both Kemble and Thorpe,

it is God who has offended the Geatish war-king, and they boost Beowulf's might

wherever possible. Inevitably, Beowulf, will directly fight the fire-drake, as opposed

to Hrothgar, who depended greatly upon his loyal thanes and the arrival of a foreign,

reputable warrior. Wherever possible, these nineteenth-century translators erase or

correct the sorrow, grief, or fear expressed by male leaders, glossing these emotions

as anger or placing them alongside reminders of their violent past and reputations,

---

[67] Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, pp. 156–7.
[68] ASD s.v. *ge-belgan*.

reminding their audience of the militant masculine identity they both embody and romanticise.

While Beowulf remains the embodiment of militant masculinity throughout the poem, particularly in Kemble and Thorpe's translations, we see a social transition in characters such as Hrothgar, who elects to settle feuds with gold rather than immediate violence. Hrothgar is not alone in his seeming transition from militant masculinity, with Mary Dockray-Miller that Wiglaf, Beowulf's loyal thane, 'offers a new definition of heroic masculinity for a post-Beowulf […] world'.[69] It is only after Beowulf's troublesome death, however, that we see this new heroic masculinity in action – 'new' in the sense that scholarship has previously not recognised nuances or variation within early medieval masculinities. After Beowulf is mortally wounded by the dragon, the poet describes Wiglaf, the only thane that remains loyal in the face of inevitable demise, as '*sarig-ferð*', literally 'sorrowful-soul'. Wiglaf emotionally predicts incoming battles from the Franks and Frisians now that the Geats have been left without a lord. Wiglaf arranges Beowulf's funeral, and the poet describes this as 'eorl ofer oðrum unlifigendum, healdeð hige-mæðum heafod-wearde leofes on laðes' (one man over another void of life, holds a weary-minded wake over friend and foe).[70] Kemble describes Wiglaf as a '*sarig-ferð*' (warrior sad of mind) in his grief for Beowulf, as well as 'the active champion' and 'the young warrior'. Regarding the funeral,

---

[69] Mary Dockray-Miller, 'Dating Wiglaf: Emotional Connections to the Young Hero in *Beowulf*', in *Dating Beowulf: Studies in Intimacy*, ed. by Daniel C. Remein and Erica Weaver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 304–18 (p. 304).
[70] Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ll. 2908–10.

Kemble translates: 'eorl ofer oðrum unlifigendum, healdeð hige-mæðum heafod-wearde leofes on laðes' (Wiglaf, Wihstan's son sitteth over Beowulf, one warrior over the other depraved of life holdeth sorrowfully ward of good and evil).[71] Again, *eorl* (earl) is replaced with 'warrior' to provide a more immediate image of violent behaviour and a militant masculine identity that can be prescribed to all male characters. Wiglaf's grief, however, is unavoidable even by Kemble, with such emotion playing a pivotal role in the cultural transformation of masculine identities. Dockray-Miller writes that 'Wiglaf's masculine appeal and social status are enhanced by his grief in such a way that his performance realigns the poem's definition of heroic masculinity away from military expertise and towards emotional association'.[72] Despite Kemble's attempts to place Wiglaf's status as a young warrior alongside his grief, the heavy role emotions have within his newly-attained leadership are undeniable. Furthermore, Wiglaf states in a speech that 'oft sceall eorl monig anes willan wræc adreogan, swa us georden is' (many a man shall often suffer wrack for the will of one alone, as has happened to us).[73] Wiglaf, despite his loyalty to Beowulf in life, cannot deny that the former king's actions have inflicted doom upon the Geats. This is a heavy criticism of the wrong doings that have left them vulnerable to attack. Though more pronounced in the wake of Beowulf's death, these social boundaries between warrior and king have often been left unacknowledged in scholarship.

---

[71] Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf,* p. 117.

[72] Dockray-Miller, 'Dating Wiglaf', p. 304.

73 Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript,* pp. 288–9; ll. 3076–77.

Wiglaf, like Hrothgar in both deeds and speech, presents a future in which masculine leadership has transitioned away from senseless feuding.

While the poem itself expresses the potential for social boundaries concerning masculinity and criticism where such boundaries are breached, such as Beowulf's inevitable death fighting the dragon, these translators adjust such episodes to fit into their own Victorian cultural ideals. Kristen Mills states that, 'Victorian and modern views on masculinity have influenced the critical reception and interpretation of male tears in the corpus of Old English literature'. By assessing these early translations and placing them within the contexts of their own contemporaries, namely Joseph Bosworth's 'dictionary of Anglo-Saxon', one can clearly envision the cultural adjustments and corrections made by translators in order to construct a more dominant and violent masculine identity that is embodied by both warriors and kings alike. However, this does not remain solely a Victorian issue concerning contemporary scholarship, translation, and adaptation, with studies in masculinity only taking root in the last thirty years and remaining in their early stages. Medieval masculinities are still frequently understood to be persistently or solely violent, and all too often this identity is used in contemporary political movements. More recent scholarship by academics, such as Clare A. Lees and Ann Marie Rasmussen, has begun to acknowledge the plural nature of medieval masculinities, not just within the confines of *Beowulf* or, indeed, the wider Old English literary corpus, but across medieval literary and historical studies. However, we must also continue to reassess how translation itself contributes to the construction of presumed gender and social

identities and cultures. As I have shown, the choices made by translators can and do result in varying depictions of masculine and, more broadly so, gendered identities, many of which have either unintentionally, or in the case of many Victorian translators, purposefully reconstructed such identities to fit ideological and contemporary cultural ideals. The incorporation of translation studies into scholarly methodologies provides new avenues in which future scholarship concerning gender studies, or otherwise stated, can take root.