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## **Kemble, *Beowulf*, and the Schleswig-Holstein Question**

The connection between philology and nationalism in the nineteenth century has recently been restated and re-examined by Professor Joep Leerssen, of the University of Amsterdam, in his book *National Thought in Europe*, which reminds us, among much else, how unstable the national map of Europe has been, not merely in recent years following the breakup of both the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, but for most of the preceding two centuries. He cites the comment of General de Gaulle, who declared that only two of the six founder-members of the European Economic Community (which was to become the European Union) could be seen as having deep historic roots: France (predictably), and the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Of the others, Italy and Germany were the result of nineteenth-century unification, while Belgium and Luxemburg resulted from nineteenth- or twentieth-century partitions – as is also true, for instance, of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, or Denmark and Norway. Some European nations may have a better claim to historic unity, but most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe now belonging to the European Union result from the post-World War I breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This whole process, Leerssen points out, was energized and given political force by the argument that language boundaries should determine national boundaries – though, as Leerssen also points out, the two are quite dissimilar, languages frequently shading into and overlapping with each other in a way which cannot be harmonized with the claimed authority of nation-states (p. 175). In brief, every aspect of the powerfully expanding discipline of nineteenth-century philology was pressed into nationalist service, including the compilation of dictionaries, the establishment of official forms of language, and the rewriting of literary

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<sup>1</sup> J. Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam, 2007), p. 145.

history. National feeling, which for so long has seemed a fact of life, was instead very often the result of a ‘non-stop multi-media cult’ (p. 203) promoted by a network of scholars.

The storm-centre of this process was Germany, and the main actor in it was Jacob Grimm. His position was, indeed, symbolically recognized in 1848, the ‘Year of Revolutions’, when representatives from the many independent German states gathered to hold a *Nationalversammlung* or National Assembly in Frankfurt, an assembly which would indeed set much of the unification agenda later to be put into practice by Bismarck. In this assembly the delegates sat in a semi-circle facing the Speaker, who had a line of prominent dignitaries behind him. In the centre of that semi-circle, directly opposite the Speaker, was one chair set apart from the others. It was reserved for Grimm. His prominent and individual position identified him as the symbolic heart of as-yet non-existent *Deutschland*, and paid tribute to what Leerssen calls an unparalleled, if often imitated feat of ‘cultural consciousness-raising’ (pp. 182-3, 153).

Defining *Deutschland* was, however, no easy matter, as one can see from the first stanza of Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s *Lied der Deutschen*, now better-known as *Deutschland über alles*, and still the national anthem of modern Germany.<sup>2</sup> This asserts that *Deutschland* runs ‘from Maas to Memel, from the Etsch to the Belt’. Even in Hoffmann’s time only the Memel – now the river Neman, on the borders of Lithuania and Kaliningrad – was within a German state, in East Prussia. The Etsch, or Adige, is still inside Italy, part of the still-disputed territory known (to German-speakers) as the South Tirol. The Maas, or Meuse, is in Holland/Belgium, and the Belt is the *lille bælt* between Jutland and the island of Fyn, well inside Denmark by almost anyone’s calculation (though see further below). Underlying the anthem were Grimm’s assertions that a nation must be co-existent with a *Volk*, and that a *Volk* meant people who spoke the same language, confirming his predecessor Ernst Arndt’s assertion – in an earlier if unofficial anthem<sup>3</sup> – that the territory of *Deutschland* was wherever *Deutsch* was

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of this, see U. Müller, “‘Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles’? Walther von der Vogelweide, Hoffmann von Fallersleben and the “Song of the Germans”: Medievalism, Nationalism, and/or Fascism’, *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie Workman*, ed. R. Utz and T. Shippey (Turnhout, 1998), pp. 117-29.

<sup>3</sup> Arndt’s anthem was ‘Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?’, see Leerssen, *National Thought*, pp. 177-8.

spoken: which would take in, and Grimm indeed listed the territories,<sup>4</sup> Alsace-Lorraine (Elsatz-Lotharingen), Schleswig-Holstein, Austria, the Czech *Sudetenland*, and even Switzerland, all except the latter soon to become sites of *Anschluss* or of shooting wars rather than philological disputes.

But even if it were to be accepted that the *deutsch* language and the *deutsch* land should be coterminous, how was one to fix the definition of the language (remembering Leerssen's point about dialect overlaps and continuums)? Grimm's own usage was not consistent. The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* which he and his brother Wilhelm began to publish in 1854, to be completed posthumously in 1933, was indeed a dictionary of *deutsch*, that is to say *Hochdeutsch* or High German, which is what English-speakers now mean by 'German'. His *Deutsche Grammatik*, published serially from 1819, was however a grammar not of modern German but of the early forms of what are now called 'the Germanic languages', including prominently Old English and Old Norse. When his *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835, 4<sup>th</sup> edition 1875-8) came to be translated into English in the 1880s, J.S. Stallybrass cautiously titled it *Teutonic Mythology*. Though Grimm made strenuous efforts to render this work as 'German' as possible, the bulk of his material inevitably came from Scandinavian records. The terminology which he devised for the 'Germanic' languages was indeed much resented by Scandinavian scholars,<sup>5</sup> as implying that *Hochdeutsch* was in some sense the central or hegemonic language of the group: they could see political take-over looming behind philological classification. Grimm indeed notoriously argued that both Denmark and Danish had no real justification for independent existence, asserting on astonishingly flimsy linguistic grounds that the Jutish dialects were different enough from standard Danish to be re-classified as forms of German, while as for the Danes of the islands – they should be amalgamated with Sweden.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> In his 1848 *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*: see Leerssen's as yet untranslated book, *De Bronnen van het Vaderland: taal, litteratuur en de afbakening van Nederland* (Nijmegen, 2006), pp. 46, 203.

<sup>5</sup> See H.F. Nielsen, 'Jakob Grimm and the 'German' Dialects', , *The Grimm Brothers and the Germanic Past*, ed. E. H. Antonsen with J. W. Marchland and L. Zgusta (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 25-32.

<sup>6</sup> His argument turned on the fact that while the definite article in German is prefixed, but in standard Danish is suffixed, the former is true of some of the non-standard Jutish dialects of Danish: thus proving that Jutish is more like German than Danish, and that Jutland should become German territory – as much of it did post-1864. Several observations by Grimm, most significantly

argument was to roll on for decades, with increasing bitterness, exacerbated of course by the post-1864 political take-over of much of Jutland up to the *lille bælt*, not to be reversed till 1919.

Even more problematic was the position of the ‘Low German’ languages, or dialects, including Dutch, Flemish and *Plattdeutsch*, a clear case of a dialect-continuum which however spreads across four countries as presently constituted, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg and Germany. Many who considered themselves *deutsch* (including several famous philological scholars) were native speakers of *Platts*, but if they were to be included, there was a case for saying that the speakers of the closely-related dialects were *deutsch* as well: the English use of ‘Dutch’ to mean natives of the Netherlands corroborated the argument. In his earlier work (see note 4 above), Professor Leerssen notes an attempt to clarify the matter within the disputed areas and languages by developing the term *diets*.<sup>7</sup> In this view *diets* should be used to mean *Hochdeutsch*, while *diets* would be used for (at least) Dutch and Flemish. He further sums up the whole confused and contested politico-linguistic situation by observing that to some *Deutschland* might be defined as all German-speaking regions, but also all the Habsburg dominions ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, even those not German-speaking. Others more moderately hoped to incorporate just the German-speaking parts of the latter, while others (*Kleindeutscher*) would rule out all the Habsburg lands including Austria. To some *deutsch* included all the Germanic languages, including the Scandinavian ones and even English (as implied by Grimm’s variant usages in book-titles, see above), while others restricted it to *Hochdeutsch* alone, and yet others applied it to all West Germanic languages, including Dutch and Flemish, sometimes including and sometimes rejecting Frisian with its strong philological connections to Old English.<sup>8</sup>

Enough has perhaps been said to indicate the vexed and deeply-politicized nature of philological argument about and within the Germanic languages, but there is one further element to consider, which will lead us to the career of John Mitchell Kemble himself. This is the discovery, nature, and ownership of ancient epic. The most prominent example of European nation-forming by scholarly editing must be the case of Finland and the *Kalevala*. In 1835 Elias Lönnrot brought out his

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from his 1848 *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, are brought together by Leerssen, *National Thought*, pp. 181-5.

<sup>7</sup> Leerssen, *De Bronnen van het Vaderland*, pp. 71-73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

first edition of the *Kalevala*, based on oral poetry he had himself recorded in Finnish. It can be argued that Finland as a nation-state and Finnish as the language of a nation-state both owe their existence to yet another feat of ‘cultural consciousness-raising’, this time based on an epic poem and an independent mythology which separated Finnish off from the languages and traditions of both the powers which had historically ruled its territory – Sweden and Russia – and gave it a historical legitimacy of its own.<sup>9</sup> But though this is the most dramatic case, the urge to root a national self-image in an ancient literature which proved the immemorial existence of that self-image was felt all over Europe. Von der Hagen’s re-editing of the *Nibelungenlied* in 1807 is one case in point, N.F.S. Grundtvig’s rewriting of Danish literary history is another, and there are further parallels across Europe. It was onto this powder-train of developing linguistic, literary, and political dispute that *Beowulf* fell, on its first publication in 1815.

The poem was first published in Copenhagen, its first editor was the Icelandic Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín, and he gave it the title *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul[is] III et IV: Poema Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica*. Almost every aspect of this was contentious. Iceland was at that time under Danish rule, and in spite of its geographical isolation, separate language and especially well-preserved medieval literary tradition, did not achieve independence till 1944. Thorkelín – to give his name its usual English spelling – was a loyal and well-rewarded subject of King Frederik VI, but as something of an outsider he may have felt it incumbent upon him to be if anything *plus royaliste que le roi*, and this may partly explain his provocative titling of the poem. *Beowulf* does indeed mention legendary Danish kings prominently, but does not tell its story from a Danish perspective; and its language was immediately recognized as Old English, or Anglo-Saxon. By re-assigning that language to dialect status – he presumably regarded it as a dialect of what some would call *Old-Nordisk*, or ‘Old-Northern’<sup>10</sup> –

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<sup>9</sup> For a good account of this, see K. Battarbee, ‘The Forest Writes Back: the *Ausbau* of Finnish from peasant Vernacular to Modernity’, *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T.A. Shippey* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 71-96.

<sup>10</sup> I have found no overt justification for the term, but it was used for some time by Danish and English scholars, like Grundtvig and George Stephens, to assert ancient Anglo-Scandinavian or North Germanic unity, and to make a distinction between English and German, or West Germanic. See by contrast Kemble’s use of ‘Northalbingia’ to assert Anglo-German or West Germanic unity, p. 72 below.

Thorkelin was putting in a Danish claim to ownership of the language, as the first phrase of his sub-title asserted Danish ownership of the poem. A further motive may well have been to assert Thorkelin's competence as editor and translator, for he could claim to be a native speaker of the least-altered form of *Old-Nordisk*. An Icelander could easily read sagas written in Old Norse. If Old Norse was also *Old-Nordisk*, if *Old-Nordisk* was also called in antiquity *dönsk tunga*, if Old English was a dialect of *dönsk tunga*, then all this would tend to support the two stated or implied claims that the poem was (really) Danish, and that an Icelander would have no (real) difficulty in reading it.

A majority of the seven mostly anonymous contemporary reviewers<sup>11</sup> of Thorkelin's edition accepted his claims openly or tacitly, but two rejected them, for quite different reasons. Nikolai Grundtvig would throughout his career use *Beowulf* as a major support for his views on Danish culture and Danish literary autonomy, but he found Thorkelin's claim to being an adequate reader, editor and translator insupportable. His attack on the editor's competence led to an extended academic *querelle*.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile another reviewer of uncertain national status, from the opposite extreme of Danish territorial domination, attempted to answer Thorkelin's nationalist appropriation of the poem by a counter-appropriation which was to have a surprisingly long theoretical life: *Beowulf* was not a Danish but a German poem. The reviewer was Pastor Nicolaus Outzen, and both his career and his review demonstrate characteristic problems of self-definition on the borders of what was not yet Germany.<sup>13</sup>

Outzen was born in Terkelsbøl, which is now just inside Denmark, and was indeed a Knight of the Dannebrog. However, he spent most of his working life as pastor of Brecklum, now well inside Germany. In 1815 both villages were in any case part of Slesvig (or Schleswig), which with Holsten (or Holstein) was ruled by the King of Denmark, though they were not treated as integral parts of the Danish kingdom. The whole 'Schleswig-Holstein question' notoriously defies summary as it defied nineteenth-century solution, but very briefly one may say that an increasingly vexed issue was whether the two provinces

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<sup>11</sup> Identified and studied by A. Haarder, 'The Seven Beowulf Reviewers: Latest or Last Identifications', *ES* 69 (1988), 289-92.

<sup>12</sup> For some account of which, see *The Critical Heritage: Beowulf*, ed. T. A. Shippey and A. Haarder (London, 1998), pp. 20-24, 91-116.

<sup>13</sup> His review appeared in *Kieler Blätter* 3 (1816): 307-27. For a translation of some excerpts from it, see *Critical Heritage*, ed. Shippey and Haarder, pp. 123-31.

and their linguistically-mixed populations should belong to Denmark, or be incorporated within one or other German state. In spite of his birthplace, Outzen took the German side of the question, as is shown by the publication of his review in *Kieler Blätter*, a German-language publication strongly advocating separation from Denmark, so much so that it was closed down by the Danish authorities in 1819. Its editor in 1815 was F.C. Dahlmann: a friend of Grimm, who dedicated the *Deutsche Mythologie* to him, in 1830 one of the ‘Göttingen Seven’, professors excluded from their chairs for their ‘liberal’, i.e. revolutionary views, and a man deeply involved in and to some extent even responsible for the extension of the Schleswig-Holstein question into the wars of 1848-50 and then 1864.<sup>14</sup> He strongly supported Outzen’s view of *Beowulf*, and indeed hints that the reviewer may not have gone far enough.

Outzen’s view was that the poem, far from being ‘Danish’, was in fact composed in ancestral Schleswig. He supported this with a series of identifications of place-names in the poem with place-names in the North Schleswig area: few (apart from Kemble, see below) have found these convincing. However, the political appeal of this for such as Dahlmann derived from something like the following argument. It was generally accepted that the Angles at least – one of the three founding tribes of modern England, according to Bede – had emigrated from the area still known as Angeln in North Schleswig, presently just on the German side of the modern border. If the poem was in fact English, as it clearly was, *pace* Thorkelin, from being written not in any form of Old Norse but in Old English, then its traditions if not its wording could have come from North Schleswig as well. True, it never referred to England or the English at all, while dealing extensively with the Danes and to some extent the Jutes. True also, the population of Angeln in 1815 largely spoke Danish rather than Low German or *Plattdeutsch*. But surely what these facts indicated was a kind of continuity between

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<sup>14</sup> See W. Carr, *Schleswig-Holstein 1815-48: a study in national conflict* (Manchester 1963), pp. 36-57, and further K. A. P. Sandiford, *Great Britain and the Schleswig-Holstein Question 1848-64: A Study in Diplomacy, Politics and Public Opinion* (Toronto, 1975). A major contribution to the conflict was Dahlmann’s discovery of the ‘Ripener Freiheitsbrief’, a medieval document which appeared to guarantee that the two provinces would never be partitioned, thus eliminating a natural solution to the ‘question’, see W. Bleek, ‘Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann und die “gute” Verfassung’, *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 48 (2007), 28-43.

ancient and modern times. In modern times, a partisan might say, honest Schleswig and Holstein Germans, of impeccably German ancestry, were being forced to call themselves Danes, and might even have been compelled over the years to abandon their native tongue and talk Danish. And *Beowulf* too suggested that speakers of a West Germanic language, ancestral even to Old English, had similarly been robbed of their traditions and compelled to identify with their Danish masters. Outzen found it especially significant that the poem shows signs of hostility towards the Jutes, exactly as, in his day and according to him, the natives of North Schleswig regarded themselves as separate from the inhabitants of Danish Jutland. Implied in Outzen's piece was an argument that the poem really bore witness to something like ancient Danish colonialism, or even 'ethnic cleansing', something (in his and Dahlmann's view) still active in his own day and crying out to be reversed. The contrast in it between English language and Danish interests, far from proving it to be Danish as Thorkelin had said, was an argument for modern 'irredentism', the recovery from Denmark of territory once securely, because linguistically, West Germanic: and therefore *deutsch*.

There was one further accusation which could be levelled against Thorkelin, and this time a correct one. Thorkelin, born in 1752, was essentially pre-philological. His edition of 1815 shows no awareness of the major advances in linguistic science of the early nineteenth century, first signalled perhaps by Rasmus Rask's pioneering grammar of Old English in 1817, but very much advanced by Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* as it appeared serially from 1819. His linguistic and indeed his historical apparatus was quite outdated, and would very soon be exposed as inadequate. J.M. Kemble, meanwhile, born in 1807, a fervent acolyte of Grimm and devoted to the methods and results of the *Grammatik*, which he famously labelled as Grimm's 'iron-bound system', and for a while probably the only Englishman to understand it,<sup>15</sup> was a natural candidate to take on the task of re-editing *Beowulf* for

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<sup>15</sup> He uses the phrase 'iron-bound system' in the 'Preface', to his first (1833) edition of *Beowulf*, p. xxviii. It was immediately mockingly repeated by an anonymous correspondent of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, see *Critical Heritage*, ed. Shippey and Haarder, p. 197. Kemble wrote a long review of Grimm's *Grammatik* in 1833, but though it was set in type for *Foreign Quarterly Review* it was never published. He announced a set of twenty lectures on the history of the language at Cambridge the following year, and wrote to Grimm that they had been 'eminently successful', but only three appear to have been delivered, see respectively *John Mitchell Kemble and Jakob Grimm: A Correspondence 1832-*



the English-speaking world, in the process exposing Thorkelin's linguistic errors and political bias – if unfortunately adding a marked political bias of his own.

As regards the Schleswig-Holstein question, Kemble was an unhesitating and even an extreme supporter of the German position. In 1840, for instance, he wrote in a letter to Grimm that Englishmen were 'beginning to feel very proud of our Teutonic element, and to believe God meant something by it when he sent the Northalbingians to Britain'.<sup>16</sup> Nordalbingia was at the time something of a code-word for 'independent Schleswig-Holstein freed from the Danish yoke', but the truth is that neither the word nor the idea had any meaning for Kemble's countrymen at all. Later on Kemble seems to have realized as much, making a habit of referring to the Germanic ancestors of the English, not as 'Nordalbingians' or 'Angles', still less 'Jutes', but as 'Saxons', as for instance in his two-volume history of 1849, *The Saxons in England*: 'Saxons', still on the map of Germany as *Sachsen*, were much the most German-sounding of the alternatives available. Kemble's Germanophilia, noted and derided even in his own time (see note 15 above), strongly coloured his views on and his edition of *Beowulf*. His involvement with the poem, however, like so much of his life in general, was marked above all by a sense of angry muddle, with positions confidently held and as passionately discarded, semi-apologies covered up by noisy bluster, offence continually given and taken, and over all a distinct lack of generosity in recognizing or acknowledging the discoveries of others (apart from Grimm), together with a high-handed attitude even to his own text.<sup>17</sup> All this made it difficult for others to accept that Kemble was often right, and prevented him from receiving the academic recognition which was, on balance, probably his due.

The simple chronology of Kemble's work on *Beowulf* illustrates some of the points above. He brought out his edition of the poem for the first time in 1833. It was a major improvement on

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1852, ed. R. A. Wiley (Leiden, 1971), p. 57, and in the same volume, Wiley, 'Kemble's Lifetime Debt to Grimm', pp. 1-18 at 9; further, Wiley, 'Grimm's Grammar Gains Ground in England 1832-1852,' *The Grimm Brothers*, ed. Antonsen, pp. 33-42.

<sup>16</sup> See *Kemble and Grimm*, ed. Wiley, p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Kemble is normally given respectful treatment by English-speaking Anglo-Saxonists, as in some sense the founder of their discipline, see B. Dickins, 'J.M. Kemble and Old English Scholarship', *PBA* 25 (1939), 51-84, but it is undeniable that he lacked social skills.

Thorkelin and remained standard for many years.<sup>18</sup> His 1833 ‘Preface’, however, went out of date almost before it reached the press. In it Kemble argued that *Beowulf* was essentially a historical work, and that its characters could be identified and dated. This is not *entirely* incorrect. Almost the only fact which two centuries of *Beowulf* scholarship have established is that the death of Beowulf’s uncle Hygelac, often mentioned in the poem, is corroborated by almost-contemporary evidence and can be dated round the year 525. N.F.S. Grundtvig had noted this already, in 1817, though admittedly in an obscure footnote which Kemble might easily have missed.<sup>19</sup> However, Grundtvig was Danish, and committed to a Scandinavian setting for the poem, and Kemble may have ignored him for that reason alone. Though the point was restated much more clearly, and in German, by Heinrich Leo in 1839, even after that date Kemble was almost alone among *Beowulf*-scholars in rejecting the identification:<sup>20</sup> he did not want to see Beowulf’s dynasty identified as Scandinavian, for the kind of nationalist reasons given above. Kemble had furthermore clearly read Outzen’s long review, and in his turn promoted the idea that the events of the poem were to be located in Schleswig. On p. xvii he comments, with characteristic flat assurance, that ‘Heaðo-ræmis ... is the island of Rom (Romes-æ), off the north-western coast of Sleswic, nearly opposite to which, and not far inland, Ravenslund and Ravensberg, yet retain a record of Hygelac’s capital, Hrafnesholt.’ This is most unlikely to be an original observation, and is probably a direct if silent borrowing from Outzen, pp. 319-20. The attraction of a Schleswig setting for Kemble was, however, that it might be regarded as ancestral Anglian territory, which would make the poem, for all its Scandinavian references, in some sense historically English. The contrast between the poem’s English language and its Scandinavian preoccupations has remained a

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<sup>18</sup> See J. R. Hall, ‘The First Two Editions of *Beowulf*: Thorkelin’s (1815) and Kemble’s (1833),’ *The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference*, ed. D. G. Scragg and P. E. Szarmach (Cambridge 1994), 239-50.

<sup>19</sup> N. F. S. Grundtvig, ‘Om *Bjovulfs Drape* eller det af Hr. Etatsraad Thorkelin 1815 udgivne angelsachsiske Digt’, *DanneVirke* 2 (1817), 207-89 (285 and note). For translation and comment, see *Critical Heritage*, ed. Shippey and Haarder, pp. 24-26, 143-52.

<sup>20</sup> H. Leo, *Beowulf*. . . *ein Beitrag zur Geschichte alter deutscher Geisteszustände* (Halle 1839), excerpts translated by Shippey and Haarder, *Critical Heritage*, pp. 227-31. Kemble rejected the identification in his *The Saxons in England* (2 vols, London 1849), pp. 416-18.

puzzle for scholars, but Kemble dealt with the matter with his habitual brusqueness. On p. xii he declared that Beowulf ‘was an Angle of Jutland or Sleswic, for he was the friend and brother-in-law of Hygelác, whose father Hreðel succeeded Offa on the Angle throne’, though his reasons for thinking so did not become fully apparent for four years, and then only partially, see below. A few pages later, on p. xvi, and rather after the manner of Outzen, whose view was that the poem only *appeared* to be about Danes, Kemble simply stated that it only *appeared* to be about Geats, for ‘the Angles called themselves Geats also’. Kemble offers no evidence for this surprising remark, and indeed there is none. His motivation must simply have been a wish to stamp the poem as unquestionably English: not Danish as Thorkelin had mischievously alleged; written in a language which was autonomous, and in no sense a dialect or *Mischsprache* – Kemble pours scorn on this idea on pp. xxi, xxiii; and furthermore, in conformity with his German mentors, definitely in the West Germanic, not North Germanic, linguistic and cultural area (with all that that might imply for the fate of Schleswig-Holstein, alias ‘Nordalbingia’).

However, the problem which would very soon make Kemble’s 1833 ‘Preface’ untenable, even by him, was this. In his attempt to date the events of the poem a century earlier than 525, he relied on the works of the Danish historian Peder Suhm. Suhm was an immensely learned man, and in his gigantic fourteen-volume *Historie af Danmark* (vol. 1 1782) he considered every possible source of information in print, ranging from Latin chronicles to legendary sagas in Old Norse. Nothing escaped his eye, or his consideration. However, and unfortunately, Suhm made the basic pre-philological mistake. He gave all his sources much the same value-rating, tried to combine and harmonise them all, and ended up with an immensely over-complex schema: to quote the modern database-operator’s saying, ‘garbage in, garbage out’. Kemble’s discussion then, with its ponderings on Frotho V and Halfdan IX etc., had and has no value.

In any case he changed his mind almost immediately. As said above, Kemble wanted to make the poem historical, but he wanted even more to make it English, or Anglian, or perhaps Saxon, and all Suhm’s Scandinavian kings were a serious embarrassment. He found a way out when he ‘discovered’ several documents which set him on an entirely different line. First, he found an account in Æthelweard’s eleventh-century *Chronicle*, and another one in William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, which in some ways resemble the opening canto of Beowulf. These had in fact been noted

already, by the Danish librarian Jacob Langebek,<sup>21</sup> but Kemble presents them as his own discovery: in view of his silent borrowings from Outzen, this may be questioned. But he also found a list of English kings' ancestry in another document in his own college library, this one never previously noted, which derived the nine races of the North from one Boerinus. Kemble decided this was a mistaken form of Beowulfus, or something similar, and from it concluded that Beowulf, or Beowa, or maybe Beow, had once been not a hero but a god. Not a Scandinavian god, one of the Æsir, not even one of the Vænir, but an Anglian god, a god in ancient Angeln, from which the poem had surely come. This was the figure which lay behind the first Beowulf mentioned in the poem, at line 53 ff., the son of Scyld Scaefing, the latter himself – or themselves, for there appeared to be two mythical ancestors, Scyld and Scaef – a god, or gods. Everything else, including Beowulf the hero, the Geatish monster-killer so annoyingly associated with Danish kings, was a later addition.

He communicated all this to Grimm, in a state of great excitement, in a letter dated July 17<sup>th</sup> 1834.<sup>22</sup> Grimm was persuaded, and just had time to squeeze it into an 'Appendix' of the first 1835 edition of his *Deutsche Mythologie*, where it reinforced the rather thin *deutsch* contribution to that work, as against the much better-evidenced Norse material he normally had to rely on. It was, however, too late even for Kemble's 1835 second edition, which was much the same as the 1833 one (except for the correction of a set of vowel-length accents which had embroiled Kemble in controversy with English Anglo-Saxonists). Kemble accordingly wrote his discoveries up in a pamphlet, *Über die Stammtafel der Westsachsen*, significantly published in German only, in 1836, which concludes with a certain triumph:

*Beó* oder *Beówa* kommt mir also völlig wie ein Gott des Segens und der Fruchtbarkeit vor; als Held aber und *Beowulf Scylding* ist er der Stammvater und Stifter der germanischen Völker: in jeder Beziehung ist er fast identisch mit Scaefa seinem Vater oder Grossvater.

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<sup>21</sup> In the first volume of *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum Medii Aevi*, ed. J. Langebek (Copenhagen, 1772), see *Critical Heritage*, ed. Shippey and Haarder, pp. 76-7. These two accounts have become part of accepted *Beowulf* scholarship, translated for instance in G.N. Garmonsway and J. Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues* (London and New York, 1968), p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> See *Kemble and Grimm*, ed. Wiley, pp. 61-8.

[Beo or Beowa therefore appears to me entirely as a god of abundance and of fertility; but as hero and as Beowulf the Scylding he is the ancestor and originator of the Germanic peoples: in every respect he is almost identical with Scafa his father or grandfather.]<sup>23</sup>

It remained only for Kemble to communicate his discoveries to an English-speaking audience, the right place for which would surely have been as ‘Preface’ to his 1835 second edition. Since, however, he had missed his chance of that, in his 1837 translation of the poem<sup>24</sup> – which characteristically included the ‘Glossary’ which would obviously have been more serviceable if printed with the edition – he added a ‘Postscript to the Preface’ which blamed the Danish scholars for misleading him, entirely abjured his earlier view of the poem as historical, and made the poem, in spite of its very evident references to Scandinavian legendary history, at heart mythical. The translation does, however, somewhat clarify Kemble’s claim, made in 1833 and never retracted, that Beowulf was an Angle. In modern editions of the poem lines 1925-32 are punctuated with a clear stop – Klaeber adds a blank line – after *mapmgestreona* in line 1931. It is assumed that Hygd, the young queen of Beowulf’s uncle Hygelac, who is commented on favourably in lines 1926b-31a, is entirely different from the woman whose career is described in lines 1931b-62, and who is said to have changed from being a dangerous bearer of false and fatal accusations to being entirely admirable, after her marriage to Offa. This latter personage must be the Continental Offa, ruler of the Angles before their emigration to Britain, and remembered well enough in legend for the eighth-century Mercian king to take his name. As wife of Offa and mother (or grandmother) of Eomer, another figure to be found in Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies, this lady was arguably English, or English enough for Kemble’s purposes.

However, the 1837 translation shows up Kemble’s misunderstandings of the passage. Kemble’s edition reads (pp. 136-7, lines 3847-62 in Kemble’s numbering) :

bold wæs bét-lic, / Brego-róf cyning / heá healle / hygd-swíðe  
geóng, / wís wel-þungen / þeah ðe wintra lyt / under burh-locan

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<sup>23</sup> J. M. Kemble, *Über die Stammtafel der Westsachsen* (Munich, 1836), p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> J. M. Kemble, *A Translation of the Anglo-Saxon Poem of Beowulf, with a copious glossary, preface and philological notes* (London, 1837). The ‘Postscript’ is pp. i-iv.

/ ge-biden hæbbe / Hæreþes dohtor; / næs hió hnáh swá þeah, /  
 né tó gneáð gifa / Geáta leódum, / máþm-gestreóna: /mód-  
 þryðo wæg / fremu folces cwen, / firen on-drysne . . .

This is not very different from the readings of modern editions (and a marked advance on Thorkelin). However, the colon after *máþm-gestreóna* suggests that Kemble read what follows as continuous from and reinforcing what went before, instead of being the marked disjunction now generally accepted. But only when his translation appeared in 1837 was it clear how he read the passage; and what this shows is that Kemble had failed to recognize the sense of the two adjectives *hnah* and *gneað*. Both mean ‘ungenerous’ – the Norse cognate of the former is *hnöggr*, which gives us modern English ‘niggardly’ – and the passage says, with characteristic Anglo-Saxon litotes, that Hygd was far from ungenerous, i.e. she was as liberal with gifts as a queen ought to be. Kemble, however, translated in exactly the opposite sense (p. 78):

the house was excellent, the king, a famous chieftain, kept his lofty hall, the very young Hygd, wise and well dignified, although but few years he had dwelt under the enclosure of the city . . . . Hæredh’s daughter; she was nevertheless not condescending, nor too liberal of gifts, of hoarded treasures, to the people of the Geáts; the violent queen of the people exercised violence of mood, a terrible crime . . .

Perhaps he was misled, forgivably enough, by reading backwards from the clear statement immediately following about a queen who behaved very badly (a different queen, as is now agreed, the lady reformed from her evil ways by Offa). However, it is all too likely that here Kemble, for all his strictures on Thorkelin, was just following the Iclander’s lead. Thorkelin had printed the text (p. 145), with his usual run of errors of transcription and word- and line-division, ‘Næs hio hnah swa þea / Ne togeneaþ / Gifa Geata leodum / Maþm gestreona’, and translated in the facing column, ‘Non erat illa comis, verumtamen / Non sibi devinxit / Donis Gothicam gentem / Prætiosorum cimeliorum’. This in its turn might be translated, ‘She was not obliging, indeed she did not bind to herself the Gothic people by gifts of precious treasures’. The *sibi devinxit* can perhaps be explained by assuming that Thorkelin thought *to gneað* to be a part of the verb *teon* (past participle *getogen*), ‘to pull or tug’, just the kind of error which Kemble would normally have derided

from the security of the Grimm ‘iron-bound system’. Nevertheless Kemble effectively repeated Thorkelin’s sense.

From this, furthermore, he concluded that Hygd, daughter of Hæreth and wife of the Geatish king Hygelac, had previously been the wife of the Anglian king Offa, that she was the lady who had undergone drastic reform, and that the whole Geatish dynasty was Anglian: one might say, *quod erat demonstrandum*. Why Kemble thought that Hygelac’s father Hrethel had succeeded Offa on the throne, why Hrethel might have thought it advisable to marry his predecessor’s widow to his son – these decisions remain obscure.<sup>25</sup> And indeed there is a great deal in Kemble’s arguments and even more his mode of procedure which cannot but baffle or annoy. He borrowed ideas without giving credit, as in the case of Outzen’s place-names, Langebek’s analogues, and possibly even Thorkelin’s translations; he attacked all his predecessors, as shown by his correspondence in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, often correctly, but rudely and arrogantly; he founded extremely sweeping theories on his own minor and mistaken manuscript discovery; hardest to forgive is the way that he makes flat statements which he must have known had no basis – as, for instance, ‘the Angles called themselves Geats also’. He was, alas, an unscrupulous person, which of course was his own concern. But in having a nationalistic axe to grind, and in using *Beowulf* to grind it, he was entirely in line with other *Beowulf* scholars, both of his own time and later. The only difference is that he chose a different nation, England, though even this was subsumed into the larger dispute between German and Dane, or in linguistic terms between West and North Germanic.

Kemble went on to make further and genuine discoveries in his area. In the researches for his six-volume *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici* (1839-48) he found several English place-names which might be taken to support an old myth of Beowa and Grendel, and while his 1849 *The Saxons in England* is notable, as said above, for its utter refusal to accept even Leo’s demonstration that Beowulf’s uncle Hygelac was very likely a historical figure, it was overall a remarkable work for its time. Nevertheless his *leitmotiv* as regards *Beowulf* remained the conviction that it was a stratified poem which was at bottom mythical. As he wrote to Grimm in 1842, protesting against what

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<sup>25</sup> One might note further that Kemble’s labelling of Beowulf as Hygelac’s brother-in-law, see above, rather than his maternal nephew, presumably arises from misreading of lines 374-5, which refer not to Beowulf but to Beowulf’s father.

was by then the general scholarly German acceptance of Leo, ‘Beowulf, Beowulf himself, both God and Hero, I cannot give him up!’<sup>26</sup>

Grimm continued to correspond with Kemble till at least 1852 – Kemble died in Dublin on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1857, just short of his fiftieth birthday – but the relationship seems on Grimm’s side at least to have cooled, for reasons which one can imagine but which I will not here particularize: Kemble’s marriage to the daughter of a former Göttingen colleague of Grimm collapsed in his later years, with Kemble making accusations which now seem barely credible.<sup>27</sup> However, there is no question that, right or wrong, he made his mark. On the *Deutsche Mythologie*, which has remained in print to this day, still repeating his thesis. On attitudes to *Beowulf*, which have survived despite the marked switch of power in this area from German to Scandinavian views. Possibly on the classification of Germanic languages, where the position of Old English has only recently been further nuanced,<sup>28</sup> and possibly even, in view of later events, on the present position of the Danish-German border, twice redrawn since his time, proposed for further redrawing yet again after World War II, and in some views still in the wrong place. But the most lasting legacy of Kemble’s work on *Beowulf* must be the modern conviction that the poem has no historical value, and that the sense of history it so strongly conveys is, as Tolkien said, just the product of literary art, ‘the glamour of Poesis.’ Tolkien also said, however, that ‘slowly, with the rolling years, the obvious (so often the last revelation of analytic study, may come to be discovered,<sup>29</sup> and I conclude with one final, if suitably tentative query to the Kemble legacy. Is it after all not quite impossible, just barely thinkable, that perhaps the *Beowulf*-poet may have known what he was talking about?’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Kemble and Grimm*, ed. Wiley, p. 231.

<sup>27</sup> See, if required, *ibid.*, pp. 265-6, 271-2, etc.

<sup>28</sup> By H. F. Nielsen, *The Early Runic Language of Scandinavia: Studies in Germanic Dialect Geography* (Heidelberg, 2000), esp. pp. 290-93.

<sup>29</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*’, *PBA* 22 (1936), 245-95, at pp. 248 and 250.

<sup>30</sup> One straw in the wind may be the recent discovery of not one but two very large Iron Age halls at the village of Lejre in Denmark, long recognized as the legendary seat of the Scylding dynasty and therefore of Heorot. The discovery has received different interpretations with regard to *Beowulf*, see J. D. Niles, ‘Beowulf and Lejre’, and T. A. Shippey, ‘Afterword’, both in *Beowulf and Lejre* ed. J. D. Niles and M. Osborn (Tempe, AZ, 2007), respectively pp. 169-233 and 469-79.



But this timid challenge to the post-Kemble and post-Tolkien consensus may well be seen as one giant step too far . . .

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