

The Topography of Grendel's Moor in a Scandinavian Context

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Abstract

This article considers the use of vocabulary which has been erroneously associated with highland terrain in the first two parts of *Beowulf* from the perspective of historical lexical semantics. It is argued that highland terms such as *moor*, *mountain* and *fell* have been, perhaps unconsciously, imposed upon translations of *Beowulf*, and are neither applicable to the location of the story in Denmark, nor reflected in the vocabulary of the original text. This is demonstrated with an etymological and comparative method, with particular reference to Scandinavian topographical terminology. Translations by Francis Barton Gummere (1909) and Seamus Heaney (1999) are analysed as representative examples of interpretations of *Beowulf*, and topographical terms from these texts are collated and compared with those from the original. It is argued that events in *Beowulf* have been associated with highland terrain because of similarity between *Beowulf* and some aspects of Gothic literature, which *Beowulf* predates by centuries, but in many ways anticipates. *Wuthering Heights* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are used as salient examples of prominent works in British literature which feature moorland as a key characteristic associated with Gothic literary conventions.

Keywords: *Beowulf*; moorland; Gothic; Baskervilles; *Wuthering Heights*; moors; Old English poetry

‘Above all, avoid the moor, when as the old parchment
frankly put it, the powers of evil are exalted.’
Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

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1. Introduction

A reading of the first two-thirds of *Beowulf*, aided with a dictionary or in translation, can lead an incautious reader to believe that the landscape of Denmark is typified by moors, heaths and fells. For example, the description of Grendel and his mother in line 1348 *micle mearcstapan / mōras healdan* is translated by Gummere (1909) as 'march-stalkers mighty the moorland haunting' and by Heaney (1999) as 'Prowling the moors, huge marauders.' *Prima facie*, such translations may seem natural and obvious, as the Present Day English (PDE) word *moor* is the direct descendent of the Old English (OE) *mōr*, and has undergone no significant phonological change since OE. Indeed, Abram notes that 'it is almost impossible to persuade *Beowulf* translators [that *mōr*] is not directly equivalent to moor in modern English' (2019: 123). However, *moor* has undergone semantic change since OE. In OE *mōr* may refer to any waste ground, while in PDE *moor* refers to a type of highland terrain, for which evidence is not found in the original text of *Beowulf* (see 5.1 below). This article argues that there is a disjunction between the source text and translations of *Beowulf* and that the modern connotations of *moor*, as well as the significance of moorland in modern literature, especially within the Gothic tradition and the influence it has projected onto English literature in general, have had an influence on modern scholars and translators working, as it were, *backwards* in time, so that late modern literature has affected the reception of OE literature. This has led to inappropriate terminology for highland terrain being imposed upon editions, translations and adaptations of *Beowulf*.

2. Selected translations

When choosing representative examples of translations of *Beowulf*, there is no shortage of options. *Beowulf* is translated frequently, especially into modern English (Magennis 2011). Few make it as far as the bestseller lists. As representative examples of the best-known translations, however, Francis Gummere's (1909) and Seamus Heaney's (1999) were chosen.

There are an enormous number of modern English translations of *Beowulf* to choose from.¹ There are also numerous adaptations into comic books, films, and television programs, which may be counter narratives or

¹ Magennis (2011) estimates over 40 published in verse alone, a number which has been added to since.

parodies. The question of how to choose representative translations without engaging in an all-encompassing meta-study is therefore one which requires a certain flexibility of judgment. For the purpose of this study, it was necessary for individual words to be easily identified throughout the entire poem in both translations and the original. Therefore, it was necessary to find translations into a verse type which closely matched Old English verse design, with something close to line-for-line correspondences in word choice. Any translations using prose or other metrical forms were therefore excluded. Translations by Raffel (1963), Alexander (2001), Liuzza (2012), and Wilson (2013) also met criteria for acceptability in terms of verse structure, and when consulted in connection with the present paper also contained references to highlands. However, Gummere's is not only very early and well known (and therefore has presumably had some influence on scholars' educations), but is also extremely faithful to the verse structure, being close to a word-for-word translation at points. This made it more suitable for the specific purposes of the present article than other available translations.

The two translations chosen are prominent both in the academy and in the literary world in general. Seamus Heaney's (1999) translation rapidly became recognized as one of the most significant contributions to *Beowulf* studies by a writer outside of academia, and is currently extremely common in both educational environments and research literature. Gummere's has been described as 'the most successful attempt to render in modern English something similar to the alliterative pattern of the original' (Espey 1991). Later, Heaney's has been called 'the most important English translation of the poem ever created' (Bjork 2020: 3). These two translations share certain key features in that they are both translated into approximately the same verse form as the original.² In addition, they are translated more or less verse-for-verse, with only some reordering, mostly for syntactic reasons. Heaney tends to be rather more flexible, so that 10 lines of the original are occasionally rendered by 9 or 11 lines in the translation, or verses are moved to accommodate element order in sentences. Gummere's translation is line-by-line throughout. These features make the specific choices for vocabulary items relatively easy to find compared to more liberal translations. These two translations,

² However, no attempt is made in either to conform to the specific metrical principles identified in current scholarship e.g., by Terasawa (2011): such rigorous rules are incompatible with the morphology and phonotactics of PDE.

while having some complementary features, are also somewhat contrasted. Gummere was an expert on OE, while Heaney cheerily confessed that he was not. While Gummere attempts to retain the alliteration throughout, Heaney does so only occasionally and unsystematically, so his vocabulary choice is not forced by the phonological constraints associated with alliteration. Gummere's translation was also clearly intended to be archaic in tone, by using obsolete Modern English vocabulary and syntax. Gummere's choices are often made to facilitate alliteration and brevity, the same kinds of choices Tolkien (1940) criticizes in William Morris's 1895 translation, and which Lefevere (1975) warns is a consequence of emphasizing adherence to the phonological features of original texts at the expense of other concerns. Representative examples of Gummere's obsolete vocabulary choices include 'welkin' (84) to translate *wolcnum* (l. 1374), where Heaney gives 'clouds' (97), and 'weeds' (24) for *wædu* (l. 39), where Heaney gives 'tackle' (5). Such choices make Gummere rather difficult to read for the non-specialist. Heaney's translation is written in his own, well-matured poetic idiom, and is both more accessible and, as he notes in his preface, influenced by his experience with Irish folklore and verse traditions. These two translations therefore represent complementary and contrastive projects in both time and of intent, as well as being among the most well-known translations or among the most used in undergraduate courses, and therefore the most likely to influence other writers.

After a prologue, the events in which Beowulf encounters Grendel and Grendel's mother take place in Denmark. These events are covered by fits ii-xxiii, between lines 115 and 1888. The remainder of the story takes place in Beowulf's own country of Geatland in what is now Sweden. In reality, Denmark is a flat country, with no highlands of any kind, and only a few small hills to break up the alluvium. It comprises the peninsula of Jutland and hundreds of islands of various sizes. At several historical stages, the province of Scania (Skåne) in southern Sweden has also been under Danish control, so could theoretically be conceived as part of Denmark in the poet's terms. However, this area is similarly devoid of highlands. With reference to how the *fictional* Denmark in the story should be understood, Gelling represents a significant school of *Beowulf* scholarship when she claims that the landscape is 'a fantasy construct in which incompatible features exist' (2002: 7). Abram argues with Gelling's core lexical arguments but maintains the location is 'a strange pseudo-

Scandinavia' with contradictory topographical features (2019: 139). Indeed, there is no reason to assume that medieval English audiences had any knowledge of the terrain of the real Denmark; a fantasy Denmark would have presumably been equally acceptable. There is insufficient evidence in the text alone to isolate particular events with particular named locations more specific than just 'Denmark.' However, attempts to localize the events of *Beowulf* have met with some success. Assuming that some characters and locations have real-life antecedents, archaeological evidence can allow strong claims to be advanced to localize the events further. The first two acts of *Beowulf* take place at Hrothgar's palace, Heorot, which has been associated with the farm at Lejre, in central Zealand, the largest of the islands (Niles et al. 2007). Gräslund associates Beowulf's landing site with the beach and cliffs at Møns Klint, also on Zealand, albeit an inconvenient 100 kilometres away from Lejre (2022: 123).³ Historically, much of the island of Zealand would have been untamed marshland, although in the modern era these areas have been drained for agriculture and urbanization. Nevertheless, one must begin from a zero hypothesis of some kind. A mountainous Denmark is a marked situation and requires some clear support from the text, or some narrative necessity, if such an interpretation is to inform scholarship and translations.

3. *Forced and unforced translation choices*

In any translation, there are choices to be made which may be considered either forced or unforced. For example, choices can be forced by an imbalance in the relative richness of vocabulary in certain domains between the source and target languages. Tolkien's (1940) instructions for translating *Beowulf* address this inadequate overlap of vocabulary between OE and PDE. He notes that connotations of some OE words must in practice be covered by various different vocabulary items in modern English, allowing for context; so that for example the element *ēacen*, roughly 'augmented' (e.g., ll. 198, 1663), should be replaced with 'stalwart', 'huge' or 'mighty' depending on which character or object the word describes (50). This substitution serves to fulfil a more precise denotation, aiding understanding, but reduces possible connotations, and

³ Indeed, Gräslund also argues against Lejre being the location of Heorot (2018: 140).

thereby limits the poetic sophistication allowed by subtlety of meaning. Such a translation choice, especially when dealing with an abstract concept, may be considered forced. However, in languages spoken in geographically similar places, such as across Northern Europe, the total vocabulary inventories in the domain of topography are comparably copious, cover roughly the same types of terrain, and in many cases are represented by cognates or loanwords between languages. PDE *mountain*, which is borrowed from French, and *fell*, from Old Norse (ON), are obvious examples, displacing OE *dūn*, which has a reduced meaning in PDE *dune*. In poetry, choices also depend on which elements of verse design features are to be retained, and which have to be abandoned (Lefevre 1975 provides a helpful summary, see Jakobson 1960 for a definition of verse design). The main indicator of verse structure in OE is alliteration, and attempts to produce translations in a metre similar to the Germanic are therefore dependent on the richness of synonymy in the target language in whatever domains the source text happens to address.

4. Scandinavia-specific vocabulary in Scandinavian languages

The question of how to translate *mōr* arose as a result of work on translating *Beowulf* into contemporary Swedish.⁴ It is usual for Scandinavian languages to have a set of topographical vocabulary terms which shows a distinction between Nordic and foreign geographical features. There is no exact Swedish word for the highland meaning of *moor*, and the nearest equivalent is Swedish *förffäll* (lit. 'before-mountain'), with the root *ffäll* 'mountain' cognate to English *fell* (for cognates of *moor*, see 5.1). *Fell* is itself a borrowing from early Scandinavian (OED, *fell*, n. 3). Like fells, *ffäll* are above the tree line, barren and cold. In this they contrast with moors which are biologically diverse and wet. However, anyone who can read poetry in Swedish is educated enough to know that there are no *ffäll* in Denmark. In addition, the Danish cognate *ffjeld* describes topographical features found only in Greenlandic, Faroese, Norwegian or Swedish contexts (Becker-Christensen 1999). Another word often translated as mountain is *berg* (Danish *bjerg*), which is used for mountains in non-Scandinavian contexts,

⁴ There are two previous translations into late modern Swedish: by Wickberg (1889) and Collinder (1959). Both avoid Swedish terms only applicable to highlands.

but within Denmark for modest hills. However, *bjerg/berg* is a rather generalized term for any good-sized outcrop of rock. As if to confirm this, in Grundtvig's (1820) translation to late modern Danish, *fjeld* is used only during the episode with the dragon, which takes place in Geatland.

Lawrence (1912) drew scholars' attention to the monster-mere in an influential article, arguing that *moor* and *fen* are interchangeable in *Beowulf*, and establishing that the mere is a freshwater feature, but explicitly accepting that the setting is mountainous. He further muses that 'it may be possible to reconcile these features of the landscape with actual conditions of Germanic scenery' (Lawrence 1912: 217). However, even by the time of the setting of *Beowulf*, such a concept of *Germanic* scenery is already extremely broad. The first two acts of *Beowulf* must be considered in terms of *Danish* scenery, described with English words. There is therefore a conflict in vocabulary choice when producing translations of *Beowulf* because Scandinavian-specific topography is described with English vocabulary developed for British topography.

5. Key terms in Gummere's and Heaney's translations

To assess the translation choices, topographical terms from *Beowulf* were collated, as were their translations in Gummere and Heaney. The full results are shown in the Appendix, but the relevant items include the OE components *mōr*, *fen*, *næss* and *fyr-gen*, which can be translated using PDE terms restricted to highland environments. This can lead to the conflation of rather different types of terrain. For example, lines 103–104, *mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold / fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard* is rendered by Gummere as 'march-riever mighty, in moorland living/in fen and fastness; fief of the giants' (Gummere 1909: 27) and by Heaney (1999: 9) as 'haunting the marches, marauding round the heath/and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time.' However, with their PDE denotations, moors and fens occur under quite different conditions, and in England, never in the same county. In the following sub-sections, the denotations of *mōr*, *fen*, *næss* and *fyr-gen* are considered in context with their translations.

5.1 *mōr*

The element *mōr* appears in six places in *Beowulf*, including in one compound, *mōrhōpu*, which is a hapax, but is defined as 'a pool in a

marsh' by the Bosworth-Toller dictionary (Tichy and Rocek 2019).⁵ Gummere translates four instances to 'moorland' and one to 'moor', and gives 'lair in the fen' for *mōrhōpu*. Heaney translates one instance to 'heath', four to 'moors' and gives 'moor-nest' for *mōrhōpu*. *Mōr* is of Germanic origin and has cognates in Old High German and Middle High German *Mour*, Modern Swedish *myr*, and Modern Icelandic *mýri*, all of which are usually translated as 'bog.' Stanley (2001) notes that Klaeber's glossary for *Beowulf* recommends *moor* as a direct modern equivalent. He notes also that the *New English Dictionary* divided *moor* among Yorkshire 'north-east highland' versus Somerset 'south-west lowland' readings. However, he does not note that this excludes both Dartmoor and Exmoor, which are large highlands in the south-west. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists five definitions of *moor*, two of which are descended from OE *mōr*. The oldest (OED, *moor*, n. 1) refers to wet lowlands, and is glossed with inflections of *palūs* 'marsh' and *lutōsus* 'muddy' in OE manuscripts (BT, *mōr*, n. 1 2019). This definition is listed as obsolete, but is retained in some place names in southern England, such as Sedgemoor in Somerset, and in some regions of the USA. However, the same word (OED, *moor*, n. 2) is used for unenclosed highlands, and is glossed in OE with inflections of *mōns* (mountain). Other definitions are later than OE. In PDE, *moor* refers primarily to wet highlands, and is defined as wet upland open country typified by poor soil quality, with the prevailing vegetation being moss, heather and small shrubs (Gore 1983). In addition, the sort of wet highlands to which *moor* refers in PDE are almost entirely confined to the British Isles (Gore 1983). To clarify a close synonym, moorland is distinguished from heathland in that heaths are maintained by human intervention, for example by burning or grazing, in areas that would otherwise revert to woodland (Webb 1998). Moorland can be perilous. Hollows in the moor allow the formation of bogs or mires, which are dangerous to all large animals. Snow falls on the moor, but unlike on the fell, it is unusual for it to freeze completely during the winter. These inhospitable conditions make the moor unsuitable for agriculture or settlement, and make travel difficult. Indeed, apart from the expansion of enclosure by the building of dry-stone walls, highland pastoralism in

⁵ This is an electronic version of the 1898 edition along with its supplements, and serves as the most complete dictionary of OE: henceforth BT. The extremely useful *Dictionary of Old English A-I* (2018, henceforth DOE) regrettably does not yet extend to *M*. Also, see a comparable compound *fenhop* in 5.2.

Britain has not changed much in the past 4,000 years (Fleming 1972). The North York Moors and Dartmoor are prototypical examples of English moorland, and their appearance in canonical works of English literature is discussed below.

A usual reference point for OE semantics is Latin. As noted above, *mōr* is variously glossed with *ūlīgō* ‘dampness’, *palūs* ‘marsh’ and *mōns* ‘mountain’ (BT, *mōr*, n. 1 2019). However, there are no moors in the Italian peninsula and no specific Latin word for them. This means that relying on Latin glosses out of context causes problems when comparing related words across British and Scandinavian contexts. Nevertheless, a comparable usage in OE verse is found in *Daniel* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11), as in example 1, where I translate *mōr* as ‘waste’, and in which relevant terms are underlined.

1. Ne bið þec mǣlmete nymþe mōres græs Dan. 575
 ‘there will be no meals for you but the grass of the waste’

This line corresponds with Daniel 4:12, the latter part, ‘and let its portion be with the wild beasts in the grass of the earth.’ (Douey-Rheims), ‘et cum feris pars ejus in herba terrae’ (Vulgate).⁶ *Mōres* is here a translation of *terrae*, and in the context of ancient Babylon must refer to the marshes in the flood plain of the Tigris and Euphrates, supporting the lowland reading.

These various glosses demonstrate that in OE, *mōr* refers to any wild wetland, or even unenclosed land in general, regardless of elevation. PDE has a narrowed meaning, where *moor* refers to the wet, biologically diverse highlands found at lower elevations than the barren *fells* which constitute British mountains. These points, combined with the observations about Danish topography above, show that, particularly in *Beowulf*, PDE *moor* is an unsuitable translation for OE *mōr*.

5.2 fen

In *Beowulf*, *fen* occurs twice alone and four times in compounds.⁷ Alone, Gummere translates to ‘fen’ (l. 104) and ‘moor’ (l. 1295). This suggests that to Gummere, *moor* and *fen* are interchangeable concepts. However,

⁶ The reference to wild beasts is retained in an earlier line.

⁷ Gelling (2002) provides an analysis of the use of the final components *-hop*, *-hlið* and *-gelād* with reference to extant place names in the UK.

both contribute to prototypical alliteration for those lines, so this conflation may be a result of compromise between semantics and phonology. For *fenhōp*, BT (2019) suggests ‘fen-mound’ and DOE (2018) ‘fen-refuge’, but both Gummere and Heaney give only ‘fen’.⁸ For the word *fengelād*, -*gelād* is something like ‘causeway’ (l. 1359), Gummere gives ‘fenways’ (83), Heaney, rather more colourfully, gives ‘keshes’ (95), which the OED defines as baskets filled with stones used as the base for a bridge or causeway, and which is perhaps less obscure a term in Ireland than elsewhere (*kish*, n. 2). In PDE, *fen* refers specifically to those marshlands in East Anglia and surrounding counties, all within a few metres of sea-level and historically subject to periodic flooding (OED, *fen*, n. 1b). In PDE, *fen* can only refer to low wetlands, and in its most general sense is distinguished from *moor* primarily by elevation. There are very few other instances in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (Krapp and Dobbie 1953).⁹ The DOE (2018) has ‘fen-path, way through the marsh’ which misses one of the connotations of *gelād*, that passage must be difficult (Gelling 2002; Langeslag 2015). Specifically, *Maxims II* (Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501) also contains a reference to monsters obligatorily inhabiting fenland, shown in example 2, from the hypermetric line 42.

2. þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum. þyrs sceal on fenne
gewunian
‘a thief must walk through dismal weather; a demon must dwell in
the fen.’

Þyrs ‘a giant, an enchanter, a demon’ is also used to describe Grendel (l. 426), and is glossed with *orcus* (Hell), *colossus* and *cyclops* elsewhere (BT 2019). Indeed, the association of moorland and fenland with bad spirits is not only found in OE but is a constant theme in English literature until the present day. Spirits live where humans cannot, and in Great Britain, very little of the country is uninhabitable. Many aspects of British folklore mentioned below, including spectral hounds and will-o’-the-wisp, are particularly associated with the fens of East Anglia and adjoining counties (Porter 1974; Abram 2019). Exactly how these elements of both English and Celtic folklore interact and develop before the modern era is a matter

⁸ The DOE gives uncompounded *hop* as ‘piece of enclosed land (in a fen, marsh or moor)’ (DOE, *hop*. n.)

⁹ Henceforth ASPR.

for further investigation. It must be concluded however that in OE times, as throughout the rest of British folklore and literary history, fens are ‘a profane space of exile and monstrosity’ (Noetzel 2014: 8).

5.3 Further terms: OE *næss*, *fyr-gen*, PDE ‘*fell*’ and ‘*berg*’

Gummere translates *næss* to ‘headland(s)’,¹⁰ and once to ‘mountains’ (l. 1360), as well as giving ‘ness’ for the compound *næshleoðo*. Heaney variously gives ‘craggs’ (l. 1358), ‘mountain’ (l. 1360), ‘ledges on cliffs’ (l. 1411), ‘cliffs’ (l. 1912), ‘headland’ (l. 2243), ‘clifftop’ (l. 2417), as well as ‘headlands’ for *sænæss* (l. 223) and ‘cliff’ for *næshleoðo*: both OED and BT give ‘promontory’ and ‘headland’. The place-name element *-ness* is common in Northern England and Scandinavia (Swedish *näs*, Danish *næs*) for example Furness or Dungeness in England, Røsnæs or Asnæs in Denmark, all of which are coastal. Where highlands meet the coast, the equivalent is a *fjord*. In a Swedish context, there are a large number of inland place names incorporating *-näs*, originating from times when lakes and littoral wetlands were larger. There is therefore no necessary association between *næss* and highland terrain, meaning that the usage of this word cannot force a highland interpretation on other words either.

The element *fyr-gen-* is glossed as ‘mons’ and defined as ‘mountain’ (DOE, *fyr-gen*, n. 2018) or ‘mountain woodland’ (BT, *fyr-gen*, n. 2019). This element appears as the first component in three compounds. Firstly, *fyr-genstream* (l. 1359, l. 2128), which Gummere translates as ‘stream’ (83) and ‘mountain stream’ (114). Heaney gives the former as ‘cold stream’ (94) and the latter as ‘torrents on the mountain’ (144) respectively. Secondly, *fyr-genbeamas* (l. 1414) for which Gummere gives ‘forested hills’ (86) and Heaney ‘mountain trees’ or possibly ‘dismal wood’, which otherwise has no antecedent (99). Thirdly, *fyr-genholt* (l. 1393), which for Gummere is ‘forested mountain’ (85) and for Heaney is ‘upland grove’ (97). The element is quite rare across the ASPR, but does occur elsewhere. In *The Phoenix*, *fyr-genstream* also occurs (l. 100) but its association with mountains is ambiguous. The use of *fyr-gen-* might nevertheless be considered strong evidence for mountainous terrain in *Beowulf*. The etymology supports this. *Fyr-gen-* is derived from Proto-Germanic **fergunja*, ‘mountain’ and *mons* is an attested OE gloss (Kroonen 2013). Because of these various glosses, *fyr-gen-* is an anomalous component in

¹⁰ ll. 1358, 1411, 1912, 2243 and 2417, as well as *sænæss* at l. 223.

the context of the topographical features otherwise described in *Beowulf*. The only Middle English reflex is apparently in *firegate* 'mountain goat' (Lewis 2018). It may also have a spiritual meaning of some kind. The ON cognate *Fjörgyn* is used for the name of a goddess who is the personification of the Earth. However, *fyr-gen* also can refer to a wooded hill, and is glossed with *saltus*, 'a woody district, uncultivated but used for pasture' (Lewis and Short 1969). Other uses of *fyr-gen* in the ASPR are inconclusive. However, one feature noted by Frank (1986) is that OE topographical terms, along with other vocabulary, can have a common origin but different denotations between poetry and prose, adding to the ambiguity for *fyr-gen*. In an environment defined by wetlands, small hills form permanent islands in a landscape which is otherwise subjected to periodic flooding. Trees naturally collect on these small hills, of which there are a small number in Zealand. *Fyr-gen* does therefore not necessarily indicate mountainous terrain, but may denote small hills covered in woods, and therefore cannot force a highland reading onto other ambiguous words.

With reference to other terms associated with mountainous terrain, Heaney uses *fell* on one occasion, to translate *stanhliþ* (l. 1409, BT 'rocky slope'), which in itself implies no great height. Gummere does not use *fell* at all. Modern English *fell* has its origins in ON *fall* 'mountain', and *mountain* itself is a loanword from Anglo-Norman. Neither word occurs in OE verse. A comparable setting in which mountainous terrain is not ambiguous can be found in *Guthlac A*, where *mōr* is not used, but *beorg* occurs 12 times to refer to mountains.¹¹ *Beorg* does occur in *Beowulf*, at l. 222, specifically to refer to the cliffs where Beowulf embarks his ship (see also comments on the cognate *berg* above). Later, it is used to describe the dragon's lair¹² and the barrow where Beowulf is buried, though none of the described events in these sections take place in Denmark.¹³ These terms also fail to account for a highland reading of Grendel's moor.

5.4 Ocean and river

A comparable issue to the use of highland terminology is Gummere's use of 'ocean' throughout his translation. *Ocean* is found 23 times, some of

¹¹ ll. 148, 192, 209, 232, 262, 329, 384, 429, 439, 733, 809, and 1193.

¹² ll. 2322, 2524, 2529, 2546, 2259, 2755 and 2842.

¹³ ll. 2580, 3143 and 3163.

which may be appropriate in context, and some forced by alliteration¹⁴ but which also include Beowulf's return to Geatland from Denmark, over a narrow stretch of water hundreds of miles from the Atlantic. Gummere was American, so perhaps the ocean was more prominent in his consciousness than it would have been for a European, as there are several small seas in and around Europe, while America has oceans on either side. Heaney, who was Irish, uses 'ocean' seven times, only in contexts outside the main narrative.¹⁵ In the case of *garsecg* and *gyfen*, 'ocean' is the first choice suggested by BT (2019), based primarily on interlinear glosses in OE manuscripts. This includes the Breca episode, which has an ambiguous localisation and is phrased in exaggerated terms, so the choice of 'ocean' is not as anomalous as in the more quotidian passages regarding Beowulf's sailing back and forth across the well-traversed trade routes of the Baltic Sea (see also Cooper 2021).

Another localized vocabulary limitation causes a similar forced translation choice concerning rivers and seas. In Sweden, there are two kinds of river: *älv*, a large river starting in the highlands, and *å*, a small river in the lowlands. There are no other kinds of river in Scandinavia. All rivers outside Scandinavia are *flod*. Similarly, any watercourse larger than a stream (*bæk*) found in Denmark is necessarily an *å*. This contrast between intranational and extranational terminology is consistent with other topographical terms: the seas immediately adjacent to Sweden have the element *sjö*, which also refers to freshwater lakes, in their names, while all other seas are *hav*. For the translator, this location-specific topographical terminology restricts alliterative choices in the modern Scandinavian languages, creating a continuous trade-off between the need to vary vocabulary with reference to alliteration and other phonological and metrical concerns.

The presentation of the key topographical terms presented above demonstrates that there is no *prima facie* reason to read mountainous

¹⁴ For *brim* ll. 28, 1494; *garsecg* l. 49; *lagu* l. 239; *mere* ll. 255, 2100; *sand* l. 295 (avoids final foot alliteration); *sæ* ll. 325, 1223, 1685, 2806; *geofen* l. 362; *flod*, l. 1888; *yþa* ll. 464, 534, 566 (allows for alliteration on 'o'), ll. 1918, 2367, 2412; 513 *eagor*; l. 632 '*holm*'; l. 1903 no antecedent; *wæg* l. 3158. Examples here are lemmatised according to Klaeber's glossary (Fulk et al., 2008) for ease of reference, and isolated from compounds when necessary.

¹⁵ For *flod* ll. 43, 1826; *garsecg* l. 49; no antecedent l. 553; *yþa* l. 556; *sæ* l. 579; *gyfen* (*geofon*) l. 1394.

terrain into the first two acts of *Beowulf*, and that no part of real Denmark allows for it. The question remains why some translators and scholars feel the need to impose highland terrain onto *Beowulf*. The following sections provide an explanation with reference to the influence of popular Gothic literature in the literary culture common to modern translators.

6. Fabulism vs. fantasy

The nature of the events in *Beowulf*, and how they fit into and create a narrative environment, has been a key question in the discussion of *Beowulf* as a literary object. Tolkien (1936) establishes that the monster episodes are the narrative cornerstones of the poem, highlighting the 'fairy tale' elements. With reference to his other comments on the same topic (especially Tolkien 1947), he certainly meant to use the word *Fairy* to mean an enchanted land (OED, *fairy*, A. 2a), rather than its then current use, meaning a small magical creature (OED, *fairy*, A. 3a).¹⁶ With the terminology that Tolkien established, the same distinction could be described as 'secondary world' (Tolkien 1947). With reference to *Beowulf*, therefore, the question arises whether the story is set in a fabulist world, defined by real elements and with magical elements inserted, or whether a translator's choices will reflect an entirely fantastic secondary world. The translator must decide whether to depict a realistic, albeit exaggerated, Denmark of great warriors, high halls, deep marshes and carrs or a Gothic, entirely fictional, Denmark full of monsters, mountains and moors, as apparently assumed by Gelling (2002). Such a distinction is, however, a fundamentally modern one. The secondary world phenomenon common among modern High Fantasy genre fiction was largely invented by Tolkien, albeit heavily influenced by medieval epic and romance (Shippey 2003). In an early medieval worldview pervaded by magical and religious thinking, the metaphorical and naturalistic explanations of phenomena were not clearly distinguished, and had not yet been subjected to a 'rationalisation' pushing magic into the periphery of life and literature (Tolkien 1947: 111). While the landscape of *Beowulf* has been the subject

¹⁶ Tolkien's posthumously published translation of *Beowulf* (2014) also uses 'moor' three times, as well as using 'mountain' apparently for *fyr-gen*-. However, Tolkien's *Beowulf* is a prose paraphrase, and the line numbers in that translation do not coincide with those in *Beowulf* editions, so exact comparisons cannot be made.

of less interest than more active aspects of the tale, the events do take place within that landscape, so it affects every aspect of the narrative (see especially Ball 2009; Wickham-Crowley 2006; Harlan-Haughey 2016 for discussions of this point).

In what follows, I try to place the landscape and narrative of *Beowulf* within the tradition of English Gothic literature, with specific reference to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, which is perhaps the most prominent example of that genre in the public mind, and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, which is a modernist detective novel that engages deeply with Gothic themes. These are among the most representative novels combining the Gothic while also being set on a moor.¹⁷ They also provide some contrast by author's gender (female-male), location (north-south), age (early-late) and in terms of the mystical elements being unresolved versus scientifically explained. Similarly to the selection of the *Beowulf* translations above, there are hundreds of novels which may be considered representative of the Gothic and which may have comparable themes and apparent settings to *Beowulf*. In terms of cultural salience, it is difficult to prove how authors or scholars may have been unconsciously influenced by the co-indexing of multiple overlapping literary themes.¹⁸ Other texts with comparable subject matter might be subjected to the same analysis as in the present paper.

This section of the present paper rather argues that modern conceptions of the Gothic, emerging in the 19th and earlier 20th centuries, have been superimposed on later translations of *Beowulf*, aided by similarities in themes and settings. It must however be noted that any direct connection between *Beowulf* and Gothic fiction composed earlier than the middle of the last century is unlikely. For most of the history of English literature, *Beowulf* was obscure to the point of being 'near oblivion' (Bjork 2020: 2). After Thorkelin's 1815 translation, it was the preserve of scholars, only entering the public literary consciousness in the middle of

¹⁷ This is reflected in Griffiths (2020) who also selected *Beowulf*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Hound of the Baskervilles* as the most prominent stories set in British moorland.

¹⁸ An objective means of measuring cultural salience is not available, nor indeed is a comparable proxy for sales, such as publishers' lists of units sold. However, Goodreads.com (2026) provides lists which rank various books based on user ratings. Their list of Gothic novels lists 638 titles, with *Wuthering Heights* at #3 and *Hound of the Baskervilles* at #19 at the time of writing.

the 20th century. Bjork (2020) notes a significant increase in *Beowulf* references and counter-narratives in TV and film after the turn of the 21st century. This is certainly a result of the ubiquity of *Beowulf* in the English Literature courses offered by colleges in the USA, itself partly a result of Tolkien's popularity as an author in the 1960s and 70s (Zettersten 2015). The combination of supernatural elements, the distance of the moorland from the rule of law, and the contrast between the house and the surrounding harsh countryside are key features in drawing these comparisons, and are addressed in the following sub-sections.

6.1. Supernatural elements

One factor which perhaps marks the Gothic more than any other movement in modern English literature is the casual acceptance of extraordinary threats, especially those of a supernatural origin (Ng 2015). Like the eponymous hound, Grendel is luminous and appears only at night, which emphasizes his nature as being both malevolent and spectral. These features, common to ghosts in British folklore, have been associated with the poorly-understood luminescence phenomena found over bogs and marshes, commonly known as will-o'-the-wisp (Porter 1974). These cold ghost lights must be contrasted with the warm, wholesome sources of light which originate in human homes.

Another feature of moorland is the fact that the ground rejects the dead, making it a place where proper burial observances cannot be made. The discoveries of bodies preserved in peat bogs, identified as being victims of suicide, murder or ritual sacrifice has emphasized the moor's place as outside human control, where, as Dr Mortimer puts it in *Hound of the Baskervilles*, events are 'impossible to reconcile with the settled order of nature' (461). Soberano (2023: 17) argues that, in Heathcliff's case in *Wuthering Heights*, his darkness and mysterious origins as well as his affinity with the moor make him like a body returned from the bog 'whose peaty moisture is said to answer all the purposes of embalming on the few corpses deposited there'. Similarly in *Beowulf*, Grendel and his mother, somehow, live in a space under the moor, below the water through which Beowulf himself must dive.

6.2. *Distance from law*

Salient social elements in seminal pieces of Gothic literature also have some superficial similarities to *Beowulf*. In *Wuthering Heights*, comparable characteristics to Grendel's are found both in Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, albeit in a less demonstrative form. Heathcliff is brooding, obstinate and objects to company, reflecting the indifference and inhospitality of the moor itself. His aberrant behaviour is also linked with anxieties related to his racial origins, comparable with Grendel's association with the race of Cain (see Kim 2019 for a discussion; see also Abram 2019). Throughout the childhood scenes of *Wuthering Heights*, the darkness of Heathcliff's complexion is habitually emphasized (see Beaumont 2004; Soberano 2023). However, Heathcliff is also the legal owner of the land for much of the story, which suitably for a modern-era novel is enforced by law and the power of the state. This must be contrasted to *Beowulf*'s social order, in which human power is derived exclusively from the tribe's ability to project military force and exert control over the natural environment. In the ancient Germanic society of *Beowulf*, there was no state or law independent of the tribe (Jurasinski 2003), and in the absence of that order being imposed, human settlements would return to nature. In the late modern setting of *Wuthering Heights* and *Hound of the Baskervilles*, civilisation simply fails to extend into the moor, as there are too few civilised people there to support it. In each case, whatever law there is distant and uncaring, the true ruler of the moor is whoever is most comfortable there, that is whoever is most similar to it in harshness, callousness, and deviance from norms of human civilised behaviour. In *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the moor is a place for those fleeing from ordered society, including both Seldon, the surgically mutilated mass-murderer who lurks, languageless, at the edge of the narrative, and the true villain Stapleton, whose sins have made his previous life in civilisation impossible to maintain. This contrast emphasizes the nature of deviant characters and their acquired home in the moor as being complementary: the harsh moor is the home of harsh characters, who are rejected from human society because of their inherently untameable natures. The idea that the nature of wicked people (or things that are uncannily similar to people) cannot be controlled is a key component of these three texts. In *Wuthering Heights*, wildness is not restricted to Heathcliff, but is extended to Catherine, who is unpredictable and violent and who vacillates between the moor (embodied by Heathcliff) and

civilization (embodied by her eventual husband Edgar Linton), similarly to how Grendel is drawn to Heorot and back to his home beneath the monster mere. Once dead, Catherine's ghost or memory haunts the moor around the house, demanding entry in the forms of dreams or illusions. After Heathcliff dies, the ghosts are implied by the local folk to be walking the moor together, similarly to Grendel and his mother as described in lines 1347–8, cited above. Grendel, Heathcliff and Catherine are also tragic figures, in that their torment is a result of inherited flaws. In *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the atavistic Stapleton lives in an isolated house in the moor with his sister/wife, plotting a brutal revenge against the house of Baskerville, for no offence other than existing between him and his imagined inheritance. He is the only person, he claims, who can enter the Grimpen Mire, the most dangerous part of the moor, and return alive (487). Stapleton is indeed capable of restraining, or at least concealing, his fierce hereditary tendencies, which are not highlighted in the narrative but are rather projected onto his unwitting agent, the hound itself. Stapleton himself is only happy when out on the moor searching for butterflies to add to his collection. While the motives may be different, subtle similarities between these key characters highlight a connection between the events of *Beowulf* and the suitability of a moorland environment to convey a sense of menace, both from the moor itself and from people who are attuned to its dangers.

6.3. *The (non-haunted) house*

Within broader literary approaches to these texts, elements of the ecocriticism of *Beowulf* emphasize the presence of Heorot as a human intrusion into a natural world which violently rejects it (Abram 2019). This interaction with the human world is symbolized by the building of houses and the conflict with the natural world that human building necessarily creates. The antagonists in each case are reflections of the hostility and callousness of the moor, which they bring into the houses which are supposed to be sanctuaries for human lives, defiling and polluting them with sin. The present section considers the nature of the house in *Beowulf*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The inclusion of a large and complex house is also a typical feature of Gothic stories, as a place of sanctuary which is disturbed (Ng 2015). In *Beowulf*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Hound of the Baskervilles*, spaces controlled by human beings are defined by walls, containing and

protecting those inside from the spiritual and environmental threats outside, but also preventing those threats from being seen and, perhaps, understood. These spaces are penetrated through weak points in their defences: by Grendel breaking through the door to feast, the ghost of Catherine breaking the window in the upper room, and the Hound intruding upon the low gate to the yew alley to terrify Sir Charles to death. *Beowulf* and *Hound of the Baskervilles* both feature terrifying and apparently supernatural creatures attacking an isolated house from the wetlands under the cover of mist. Indeed, *Hound of the Baskervilles* is probably the best-known literary example of the hellhound legend common to various English folk tales, and which has ancient origins (Porter 1974; Weller 2008). In *Hound of the Baskervilles*, as in *Beowulf*, the local landowner, Sir Charles, is, like Hrothgar, an elderly, aristocratic, affluent and generous man, and the victim of an apparently unprovoked spiritual attack from the moor adjoining his huge, expensive home; a renowned hero comes to investigate. In *Beowulf*, Heorot is a beacon of civilization and conviviality in a bleak and hostile environment, and is defiled by the intrusion of Grendel. While Heorot could hardly be described as a castle, it is large enough for Beowulf's company of 15 armoured men to join the throng for dinner without any difficulty in finding space or victuals, and without the king and his companions noticing their arrival (l. 327). Baskerville Hall is a rather anonymous place by comparison. Although presumably much larger, it has at the most only four residents: the baronet, two servants, and Dr Watson during most of the time covered by the novel.

The notion of the house alone as clearly delineated human space is found in both *Wuthering Heights* and *Hound of the Baskervilles*. In *Wuthering Heights*, there are two houses: The first is the Heights itself, which, due to the presence of Heathcliff, is morally an extension of the moor, equally unwelcoming and uncomfortable. Nelly emphasizes the grimness of the Heights when she tells Catherine 'laughter is sadly out of place under this roof' (100). This grim homestead is contrasted with Thrushcross Grange, an enclave of modernity and a means of connecting to a world beyond the moor. This comment on laughter reflects the contrast between Heorot and the Heights. Grendel attacks Heorot specifically because he is infuriated by the laughter of the Danes, which broadcasts a sense of community from which he is excluded and therefore despises (Pigg 2010: 203). In *Hound of the Baskervilles*, when considering a map

of Dartmoor, Holmes points out Baskerville Hall, lists a handful of other houses and one prison noting that 'around these scattered points extends the desolate, lifeless moor... the setting is a worthy one. If the devil did desire to have a hand in the affairs of men' (464). The isolated house in the deep country is therefore a significant parallel, although in the ancient Germanic world, the deep country was deeper, more distant from the law, and not necessarily in the highlands.

7. Summary

All translations and analyses of *Beowulf* have something in common: they were written in the modern era. In modern British literature, the forces of malicious nature have nowhere to hide except the moor and the fells above it. The issue for the modern translator is what constitutes wilderness in the modern mind. In a Europe where the forests have been reduced either to timber production plantations or nature reserves, and where wetlands are orderly and regulated, mountains remain the only hostile environment.

From a linguistic perspective, the OE lexical items *mōr* and *fyr-gen* are ambiguous. While some of the key OE vocabulary can be used to describe mountains, there is no OE vocabulary in *Beowulf* which *demand*s mountainous terrain around Heorot, and no reason for them to be there apart from a desire to adhere to the tropes of modern Gothic fiction, which postdate *Beowulf* by around a thousand years.

It is hardly likely that either Brontë or Doyle was familiar with *Beowulf*. However, it is impossible that Gummere and Heaney were unfamiliar with *Wuthering Heights* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and by extension the huge archive of moorland references in modern British literature and culture of which they are representative. The translation choices discussed, based on the two most influential verse translations of *Beowulf*, are indicative of a general tendency in translators and editors of OE to ascribe aspects of English culture and British geography to a Scandinavian context in which they are not always applicable. Modern notions of what constitutes dangerous wilderness subconsciously affect translations and interpretations of *Beowulf* regardless of the denotations of the topographical terms described in their medieval, Scandinavian context.

The association of moorland with tales of mystery and horror goes some way to explaining the connection between *Beowulf* and the highland setting with which it is often associated, but which is entirely absent from the original text. The addition of moorland to *Beowulf* serves to place it

within a tradition of modern English Gothic tales which it predates by many centuries, but which in a sense it anticipates. Racial and spiritual otherness is thus reflected by inhospitable terrain, and the real peril that dangerous environments pose is mapped onto and embodied in the unearthly creatures which legend places into those environments.

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Appendix: Topographical terms in Beowulf

Table 1. Topographical terms in *Beowulf* with line numbers and translation choices from Gummere and Heaney. The entries are lemmatised according to Klaeber's glossary (Fulk et al., 2008). Terms in the original which unambiguously refer to the sea, waves, weather, buildings and roads are excluded, as are kennings and proper names. Terms which can refer to *either* salt or fresh water are included. Lemmas are in order of citation in the article.

Lemma	Line	Gummere	Heaney
mōr	103	moorland	heath
	162, 710, 1348	moorland	moors
	1405	moor	moors
mōrhop	450	lair in the fen	moor-nest
fen	104	fen	fen
	1295	moor	fen
fenhop	764	fens	fens
fengelad	1359	fenways	keshes
fenhleodu,	820	dark moor	fen banks
fenfreoðo	851	moor	marsh
fyrgebeamas	1414	forested hills	dismal wood/mountain trees
fyrgestream	1359	stream	cold stream
firgestream	2128	mountain stream	torrents on the mountain
fyrgeholt	1393	forested mountain	upland grove
clif	1911	cliff	coastline
holmclif	230	water-side	sea-cliffs
	1420	foreland	cliff
	1635	cliff	lakeside cliff
brimclif	222	sea-cliffs	cliffs
stancleof	2540	cliffs	crag
næss	1358	headlands	crag
	1360	mountains	mountain
	1411	headlands	ledges on cliffs
	1912	headlands	cliffs
	2243	headland	headland
	2417	headland	cliff-top
sænæss	223	headlands	headlands
næshleoðo	1427	ness	cliff
mere	845, 1362	mere	mere

stanhliðo	1409	stone cliffs	fells and screes
wealle	229	cliff	wall
	2542	wall	rock-face
	3060	wall	rock-face
sæwealle	1924	sea-wall	cliff
waldswap	1403	woodland	forest path
wulfhleop	1358	wulf-cliffs	wolves on hills
stanbogan	2545	arch of stone	stone arch
stream	2545	Stream	Stream
holt	2598	Woods	wood
brim	847	billows	water
beorg*	211	bluff	cliffs
	222,	high hills	crag
	2304	barrow	hoard
	2322, 2529, 2546, 2755, 2842, 3163	barrow	burrow
	2524	barrow	cave
	2559	stone-way	barrow
	2580	barrow	hoard
	3143	hill	height
bearo	1363	forest	wood
botm	1506	bottom	bottom
brimwylm	1494	ocean floor	depths of the lake
flod	1366	waters	water
	1497	flood-domain	waters
grund	1367	depths	bottom
grundwong	1496	floor of the sea	solid bottom
	1394	floor	floor
lagu	1630	mere	lake
meregrund	1449	deeps of the flood	mere bottom
folda	1361	underground	(under)... moorland
	1393	(enfolding of) field	underground

* *beorg* is ambiguous and can refer to artificial or natural formations