KING ALFRED VERSUS BEOWULF:
THE RE-EDUCATION OF THE ANGLO-SAXON
ARISTOCRACY

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The initial stimulus for this paper was the polarity seen in the interpretations by two leading contemporary scholars of King Alfred’s unique reference to an ancient Germanic hero, Weland the smith. The reference appears in one of King Alfred’s adapted translations, The Consolation of Philosophy, in which Boethius’s theodicy is modified to give it an explicitly Christian character and to make room for the expression of Alfred’s own interests. As such the translation was only one part of a greater educational reform programme with an identifiable direction; it was structured, wide ranging and had an intellectual focus which could be called English Carolingian. However, Alfred was by no means just imitating the Carolingian renaissance; he was acutely conscious of the intellectual achievements of earlier generations of English scholars. In the preface to his translation of Pope Gregory’s Regulae pastoralis liber Alfred tells us that he had often recollected what men of learning – both religious and secular — had once lived throughout England. Such scholars, nevertheless, throughout the period are likely to have been predominantly ecclesiastics, whether monks or priests, devoted to working in the then only appropriate languages of prose scholarship — Latin or Greek. The unique elements in the Alfredian reforms were twofold: a forceful programme for the education of his laymen (the re-education of the aristocracy), and the elevation of vernacular prose from the diplomatic into the areas of wisdom, theology and philosophy.

Alfred’s intellectual focus was consistent with the direction of his overall educational reforms. That direction was Christian and his methods were contemporary, albeit inspired by classical models, not Germanic nor inspired by the romantic, the nostalgic, or the heroic. This paper is substantially more concerned with King Alfred

than with Beowulf. Yet, for Anglo-Saxonists, no figure symbolizes the heroic more than Beowulf, and it is in his role as representative of his world that he features here. He represents therefore the polar-opposite of King Alfred in the title.

The following quotations are from successive chapters of *The Cambridge companion to Old English literature*: ¹

A more positive attitude towards the pagan past is visible a century later in translations of the Alfredian period. King Alfred himself seems to have believed that pagan Germanic legend had intellectual value and interest for his fellow Englishmen. At one point in his paraphrase of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, he abandons the world of classical paganism for a Germanic allusion, translating Boethius’s question ‘Where now are the bones of faithful Fabricius?’ as ‘Where now are the bones of the famous and wise goldsmith Welond?’ ²

In one representative endeavour, the translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* (chs. 18-19), Alfred calls into question and presents an unsparing corrective to the heroic pursuit of lasting praise ... In his treatment of Boethius’s argument on the vanity of pursuing fame, Alfred observes that in comparison to the universe, the earth is small, but a man’s reputation cannot even extend very far on earth ... To Boethius’s allusions to the Romans Brutus and Cato, Alfred adds from Germanic legend a reference to the smith, Welond. What little reputation is left for all of these can be written in a few letters ... ³

There is a degree of irony in that both quotations come from the 1991 *Cambridge companion*, an indispensable scholarly guide, yet the above interpretations are clearly more than a little at odds. We ought to be able to search more deeply into the mind of King Alfred (that is, to appreciate the clarity of his intentions) than any other Anglo-Saxon; we have an enormous number of his own words to compare with and complement a contemporary biography attributed to Bishop Asser, a chronicle, and what might be called a body of Alfredian miscellanea. ⁴ That such contrary assumptions are possible concerning the motives for Alfred using this familiar allusion is a major concern of this paper. It is important to preface this by stressing that the reference to Welond comes at the culmination of two chapters in which the voice of *Wisdom* castigates those who would be seduced by fame:

HWÆT SYNT NU ŜÆS FOREMERAN 7 ŜÆS WISAN GOLDSMIDES BAN WELONDÆS? FORÞI IC CWAÆD ŜÆS WISAN FORÞY ŜÀ CRÆFTEGAN NE MÆG NÆFRE HIS CRÆF FOSIGAN ... HWÆT IS HEORA NU

⁴ Such an indispensable anthology in translation is *Alfred the Great: Asser’s ‘Life of King Alfred’ and other contemporary sources*, eds Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983). A recent book has claimed that the late ninth-century biography, which we have attributed to Asser, is a later forgery; see Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: University Press, 1995). Professor Keynes is preparing a reply to Alfred Smyth’s thesis, reinforcing the existing consensus of ‘a genuine Asser’.

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42 BULLETIN JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY
to lafe [Weland, Brutus and Cato], butan se lytla hlisa 7 se nama mid feaum stafu awritten? 

Where now are the bones of the famous and wise goldsmith Weland? I call him wise, for the man of skill can never lose his cunning ... What is there left of them [Weland, Brutus and Cato] but a meagre fame, and a name writ with a few letters?

It is possible to interpret Alfred's metaphor in several ways. The most obvious and direct compares the 'bones' — the few left — with the few letters left constituting the names of such as Brutus, Cato and Weland. In chapters XVIII to XIX, Alfred stresses that durability of reputation, in words, is a futile aspiration; writers are often idle or unreliable; words do not travel well beyond national or temporal boundaries.

It can be proposed that Alfred employed Weland purposefully as an example of a fading memory, and significantly the smith was evoked primarily in his role of craftsman. Alfred had a notable, and particular, fondness for the broader meanings of the word creft, and as Peter Clemoes has shown, although Alfred's extensive use of this term may be one of the debts he owed to vernacular poetry, he often elevated the status of the word giving novel (to prose) emphases to the compounds of creft.

Either as a literary metaphor, or a pragmatic Christian parable, King Alfred's change works in the same direction. His substitution of Weland was not to reveal that he had 'a positive attitude to the pagan past' (as Professor Frank); if anything Alfred is saying that it was all but forgotten! Nor is there any suggestion that he believed his use of the goldsmith transmitted intellectual value. The use Alfred made of Weland — in the contexts above — is, as Professor O'Keeffe's reading makes clear, as an unsparing corrective to the heroic pursuit of fame.

Alfred's own adapted translations are a focus of interest for many of our contemporary scholars, and the continuing debate over the nature and value of his contributions will be examined. One of these works, The Consolation, features large here since it will be proposed as a key to an understanding of Alfred's direction, both in his administrative and educational reforms. Appropriately, the final aim of this paper, by a comparison of texts, is to highlight the contrasts between the romanticism represented in a poetic idea — the heroic ideal of Beowulf — whose lof and dom have survived,

2 Walter John Sedgefield (trans.), King Alfred's version of the consolations of Boethius done into modern English with an introduction (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 48. Alfred's version throughout this essay is called The Consolation, Boethius's Latin original is called Consolatio.
though precariously in a solitary, charred manuscript, and the ever
durable memory we cherish of King Alfred, a classically-minded
English Carolingian, who proved equally in his executive role to
be a very human ideal.

King Alfred’s Educational Reforms

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in the year 853 Pope Leo
IV confirmed the young prince Alfred in Rome and consecrated him
king. A letter from Leo IV to Alfred’s father, King Æthelwulf,
suggests that the chronicler misunderstood this ceremony; Alfred
was in fact honoured by the Pope as a Roman consul. Two years
later Alfred was in Rome once more, this time for a year. On his
journey home Alfred was the guest at the court of Charles the Bald,
the most intellectually advanced centre in Europe. By contrast with
the sophistication of the Frankish empire, in c. 855 Wessex probably
had only one place — Winchester — that could even loosely be
called a town. The effects of these experiences on a boy of four to
six years of age, and, we can be confident, of an enquiring mind,
probably cannot be overestimated. He had lived among the ‘giants’
and had seen their works. It almost certainly made Alfred a
convinced, if nascent ‘neo-classicist’.

Between the year of Alfred’s accession in 871 and his occupation
of London in 886, he was in no real position to implement any
visions he may have harboured in the area of educational reforms.
In these years the very survival of the West-Saxon nobility, who
had witnessed the wholesale replacement of their Anglian
contemporaries by Danes, in East Anglia, the east Midlands and
Northumbria, was precarious. The long-term survival of Wessex and
western Mercia was eventually secured by a strategy of building
fortified towns — the Alfredian boroughs — rather than in the
success of particular battles, though the importance of the Battle
of Edington in 878 has been well established. Even so, it seems
likely that by the early 880s Alfred had laid down a strategy for a
parallel reconstruction of the spiritual fabric of his kingdom by a
programme of educational reforms. Alfred, it seems, saw no possi­
bility of rebuilding the defensive structures of his land if its spiritual
and intellectual health were moribund; the two were inseparable.

8 We should cite the probable Carolingian influence on Alfred after his visit to the court
of Charles the Bald, see Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 14; also Asser clearly had a Carolingian
perspective when compiling his biography, inasmuch as he seems to have used a Life of
Charlemagne to some extent as his model, see Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 55.
9 Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, C text, sub anno 853 [854], English Historical Documents c. 500-
10 EHD, i, 810.
11 Dorothy Whitelock, ‘The importance of the Battle of Edington’, From Bede to Alfred:
studies in early Anglo-Saxon literature and history (London: Variorum reprints, 1980), ch. XIII;
reprinted from the report for 1975, 1976, 1977, of the Society of Friends of the Priory Church
of Edington, Wiltshire, 6-15.
From this point we can proceed from a primary source of direct relevance: Alfred’s own words surviving in contemporary manuscripts, comprising the preface to his own translation of Gregory’s Regulae Pastoralis liber, popularly known as Pastoral Care. The preface was a circular letter bound into each copy of Alfred’s book, and seems to have been sent, or circulated for copying, to the king’s bishops; it can be seen as having three main concerns or elements. First it is Alfred’s diagnosis of the state of Latin scholarship and learning in general, which, because earlier generations of the English had been so reckless (swæ reccelease), had been virtually extinct when Alfred became king. Secondly it states the king’s educational reform objective: that the situation should be remedied, though restoring Latin scholarship necessarily would be a higher, longer-term aim. Finally the preface is a prescription: it proposes that certain books might be translated into English, because, Alfred tells us, many people could still read English, a revelation which by itself might surprise us.

Much of the work proposed in the preface would be undertaken by Alfred himself with the help of a circle of ecclesiastical scholars which he began to recruit and assemble probably from the early 880s. From chapter 77 of Asser’s biography of King Alfred (hereafter called the Life), and from the preface itself we can reconstruct the known Alfredian circle. Alfred tells us of his bishop, Asser, a Welshman from St David’s in Dyfed, Plegmund of Mercia, Grimbald of St Bertin’s and John of Old Saxony. Asser complements this list with Bishop Werferth of Worcester (to whom the preface in manuscript Hatton 20 is addressed), Werwulf and Athelstan, Alfred’s masspriests.

Alfred’s preface informs us of a great many things, and is justifiably called by Magoun ‘perhaps the richest and most informative shorter prose document in Old English’. Despite its clarity as a complete educational statement it can also seem a very complex piece, and is often misinterpreted because of the compressed information and allusions to different periods as far back as the earliest English Church. This has sustained considerable debate, much of which has concentrated on Alfred’s references and allusions to the past (see Fig. 1), especially on the credibility of the king’s description of the extent of the decline in

12 The manuscripts are: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 20; and London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B XI, now only charred fragments, though preserved in a Junius transcript.
13 All references to Asser’s Life are from Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred.
Figure 1
A Chronology of Alfred's Preface, c. 650 - c. 890
learning. Less contentious are Alfred's future intentions set out in the preface, among which was the proposed programme of translations which was demonstrably undertaken, since we have several late ninth-century translations, probably some of the books described in the preface as those which *niedbedearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne* ('are most needful for all men to know'). What follows here does not attempt to assess all the books but seeks to examine Alfred's intentions and leanings, since the preface ranges widely and is not limited to the proposed books or the court circle of scholars; not least it helps us determine the candidates for an education in Alfred's new royal school:

\[ \text{daet [te] eall sio giogud de nu is \textit{on} Angelcynne friora monna, \textit{dara de} da speda hæbben daet he \textit{dæm} befesulan mægen, sien to liornunga oðfæste, da hwile de hie to nanre oðerre note ne mægen ...} \]

that all the youth now in England of free men, who are rich enough to be able to devote themselves to it, be set to learn as long as they are not fit for any other occupation ...

It seems that in several ways Alfred's aspiration to broaden access to learning was unprecedented. D.A. Bullough has suggested that Alfred's royal school was a quite distinct institution from earlier continental models. Independently of the revival within the Church, Alfred created a secular school, though no doubt teachers would be clerics, whether at Winchester or court. Asser continues: 'In this school books in both languages [*utriusque linguae*] — that is to say, in Latin and English were carefully read'.

15 A rehearsal of the debate (of 1986) is not wholly relevant to the direction of this paper; for an overall view see the following: a view sceptical of Alfred's claims is Jennifer Morrish, 'King Alfred's letter as a source on learning in England', *Studies in earlier Old English prose*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, 87-107; for a view strongly supporting Alfred's claims, see Helmut Gneuss, 'King Alfred and the history of Anglo-Saxon libraries', *Modes of interpretation in Old English literature: essays in honour of Stanley B. Greenfield*, eds Phyllis Rugg Brown, Georgia Ronan Crampton and Fred C. Robinson (Toronto: University Press, 1986), 29-49; and a view considering opposing arguments though overall supporting Alfred's credibility, see Alien Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 111.

16 All quotations from Alfred's *Preface* are from Henry Sweet (ed.), *King Alfred's West-Saxon version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, Early English Text Society, o.s. xlv, i (1909-30; reprinted in 1 vol., London: Oxford University Press, 1958). The Cotton and Hatton texts are printed in parallel columns and modern English translation at the foot of the page. References to the Old English are in brackets and refer to page number, line number (7,7); page numbers of translations are in square brackets [6], eg. Sweet (7,7) [6].

17 Sweet (7, 10-12; Hatton text) [6].


19 This implication seems logical inasmuch as youths wishing to train for orders, clerical or monastic, would, despite decline in recruitment, still have discrete institutions for their specialist training.
We will look again at the school for the gioguð, but in addition to the young, Alfred intended a further group of his people to be educated, namely his civil servants, that is ealdormen and reeves who acted as judges and administrators in the king's modernized state. In Asser's final chapter a picture is drawn of the efforts of these powerful men to buckle down to Alfred's imperatives on literacy. In a scene where Alfred becomes almost Solomon-like, his words are reported in direct speech as he chastises those officials whose judgements had been lackadaisical: 'nearly all the ealdormen and reeves and thegns (who were illiterate from childhood) applied themselves in an amazing way to learning how to read' (on penalty of renouncing their offices). Asser's final characterization of the king in his magisterial pose was surely intended to leave his audience with a memorable and abiding impression. T.A. Shippey, after his analysis of Alfred's Preface, was left with similar conviction: that Alfred must have been a difficult man with whom to argue.20

We should look once more at the education of the young nobility. The school may have been a sizeable structure since Asser tells us that it accommodated 'all the nobly born children of virtually the entire area',21 though we are not told whether this means of Winchester or Wessex. Nor is it apparent whether the school, like the court, was often a travelling institution. On closer reading Asser gives us indications of two schools. The main school, mentioned above, may have been a static institution, possibly within one of Winchester's minsters. Asser tells us that the king's youngest son, Æthelweard, attended this school along with the young nobles. Significantly, Edward the Elder and Ælfthryth were 'at all times fostered at the royal court under ... tutors and nurses', where Alfred himself gave personal instruction.22 This information is interesting on several counts. For instance, it suggests an affinity between Alfred and Edward not always to be expected amongst kings and elder sons. We might contrast Alfred’s example with the rebellious tendencies of his eldest (full) brother, Æthelbald, towards their Æthelwulf.23 We could further contrast Alfred’s fathering with the later practice of diplomatic fostering of æthelings to neighbouring kingdoms.24 This information, then, seems to confirm the existence of a large royal school, most likely in Winchester, a busy centre by

21 Life, ch. 75; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 90. A portion of Alfred's income was set aside for the upkeep of 'the school, which he had assiduously assembled from many nobles of his own race and also from boys not of noble birth', Life, ch. 102; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 107.
22 Life, ch. 76; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 91.
23 Life, ch. 12; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 70.
24 Both Athelstan and Edgar were fostered to the Mercian court. We might, too, contrast Alfred/Edward's affinity with the post-conquest unhappy relationship between William I and his son Robert, which was repeated once again within a century by Henry II and Richard.
the 890s, and a small court class with tutors, which was probably peripatetic.

In seeking to determine from which ranks of society the freeborn young would be selected for Alfred's school, some critics have followed Sweet's rather severe translation (used here too), interpreting the king's phrase *da speda hæbben* as 'rich enough': a financial interpretation of a phrase that can be translated as 'to have the means'. Indeed, Keynes and Lapidge steer us towards an important corrective made by Bullough, who for *speda* prefers 'capability' or 'mental capacity'. It can make a difference to the way we view Alfred's ideals. Sweet's version implies that the royal school was something akin to a fee-paying private institution, whereas from Bullough we could argue, albeit with a degree of anachronism, that it was a prototype grammar school, though of course selected by ability or expediency: 'as long as they are not fit [required?] for any other occupation'. Bullough's interpretation is appealing; if the king were paying for the school from his taxes, why would the pupils necessarily have to be 'rich enough'?

We can now return to Alfred's phrase 'all the youth'. We must presume that at this date and unrelated to the feminine grammatical gender of *giogud*, that *eall sio giogud* probably means 'all the young men'; for instance we know that Ælftryth, Alfred's daughter, did not attend the school; and we can probably assume that the students were to be drawn from the broad class of ealdormen, thegns and reeves, though we must not ignore Asser's addition that there were also many pupils of lesser birth. After 886 Alfred was able to turn more of his energies to these mechanisms for providing a degree of intellectual rebirth and security in his kingdom. His reforms were intended for the benefit of three groups: churchmen and — women, senior administrators, and certain of the youth. Little can be said about the precise location of the new school or whether it survived after Alfred's death. Nor do we know whether literacy among senior laymen remained a prime requirement under kings Edward the Elder and Athelstan. Nevertheless, one example has recently been proposed as evidence that Alfred's aspirations for his aristocracy were more than just pious hopes. Mechthild Gretsch has examined the language in an early tenth-century document known as the 'Fonthill Letter', identifying this as an example, soon after

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26 Life, ch. 75; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 90.
27 No discrete sum is mentioned in Alfred's will for the future upkeep of the school. However, we might not expect it to be seen there, since the will concerns Alfred's personal estate whereas the provision Asser described came from revenues of the king's office. We could deduce from this that Alfred himself regarded the school as a state school; see Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 173-8.
Alfred's death, of the competent literacy of a layman. Ordlaf, the sender of the letter, had been one of Alfred's ealdormen during the period when he urged his administrators to attain literacy (the 890s). In his enigmatic letter to King Edward the Elder (899-924), Ordlaf employed a style and a vocabulary not seen in what might be called clerical Old English — the style and vocabulary which survives in most extant texts. Ordlaf's letter seems to be unique as a surviving example of a layman's style, and one that King Edward must surely have understood. Gretsch concludes that the letter is a good indication that Alfred's school 'could provide responsive minds with a firm grounding in pragmatic literacy'. We can be confident, too, that King Alfred would have been gratified that by the late tenth century another ealdorman, a member of the house of Wessex at that, was capable of translating an Anglo-Saxon chronicle into Latin.

Quid Boethius? Ubi est Beowulf?

We must turn now from the intentions and structures or Alfred's reforms and focus on the motives and machinery of his personal contributions as translator and adaptor. Specifically, the attention here will be on *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Alfred's reasons for choosing Boethius's book deserve special attention, and it will be argued that the methods he employed — parable, metaphor, and the many references he made to everyday life — provides us with a great deal of information about Alfred's *orbis*. This examination will leave us with a relevant final question: where are the heroes?

In recent years King Alfred's direct involvement in the programme of translations has been the subject of rigorous scholarship. The consensus since Dorothy Whitelock's influential essay of 1966 has been to acknowledge a unity in the style of certain of those books 'needful for all men to know'; that style is almost certainly Alfred's. Janet Bately has listed five major works attributable to the king: *The Laws of King Alfred*, *The Prose Psalms*, translations of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, the *Soliloquies* of St Augustine, and *The Consolation of Philosophy*. These works have been acknowledged, by for instance W.F. Bolton, as a great deal more than dogged translations. Alfred himself, borrowing from a well known patristic formula, described his style as 'sometimes ... word for word, sometimes sense for sense'. Almost by definition Alfred's favoured

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29 Gretsch, 'Fonthill Letter', 98.
34 Preface to *The Consolation*, Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, 131; see also, for precedents for this formula, 259, n. 164.
devices could only be effective if his metaphors were drawn from shared everyday experiences. In his versions concepts often take on physical perceptions. In one example, the preface to the *Soliloquies*, the *fontes* of wisdom of the books of the Fathers are compared to a forest where the king goes to select various timbers needed to build his metaphorical homestead. Alfred urges his reader to 'fetch more for himself' (*fetige hym par ma*). Alfred employed this style and method in both of his philosophical translations, gathering appropriate supplements from various authors to augment his basic models. We could perhaps describe Alfred best as a florilegist since, as Seth Lerer has pointed out, Alfred’s books ‘bring together different writers into florilegia’. Alfred's addiction to metaphor confirms something else, that his objectives were educational, going beyond the pursuit of straightforward translations for his own library shelf. The purpose of Alfred’s contribution was to explain the wisdom within the texts to a readership less able than himself. He had the same educational aims and used the same methods as his carolingian contemporaries: ‘Alfred, like scholars of his time, worked from text to explanation of the text’.  

Boethius’s *De Consolatione Philosophiae* had been a popular book in the carolingian schools of the ninth century; it even attracted a flourishing school of interpretation and commentary. Put simply, philosophy in ninth-century Europe was some kind of interpreted Boethius. It is not unlikely, therefore, that a leading scholar coming from that tradition, such as Grimbald from St Bertin’s, might have introduced Carolingian manuscripts, including a version of the *Consolatio*, to Alfred’s circle; a possible connection with Asser has also been suggested. Such was the importance of the *Consolatio* as a primary handbook on philosophy throughout Europe that its inclusion as one of Alfred’s ‘most needful’ books is unsurprising; but in addition Alfred seems to have had a strong attraction to, and a good knowledge of, classical history. Janet Bately has suggested that the *Orosius* translator’s ‘knowledge of the classics ... is in some ways slighter and more flawed than Alfred’s’. Given his classical interest, Alfred may have recognized a parallel between the Germanic conquests of Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries and

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the Viking devastations in ninth-century England and northern Europe. Such a parallel is often proposed as a factor in the transmission of Orosius into the Alfredian programme, but it provided Alfred with a further association, model, and perhaps motive for his Boethius translation.

During one of the Germanic occupations of the western Empire, one of the victims of the changeable favours of a teutonic emperor, Theodoric the Ostrogoth, had been the Roman senator and philosopher Boethius (d. 524). During his fall from grace and long imprisonment for alleged treason he wrote the *Consolatio*. The work was Boethius's personal search for a reconciliation of a number of philosophical concerns; it was eclectic in nature, drawing upon a variety of classical sources including Plato and Aristotle.

In most of his translations Alfred used many references and allusions to contemporary England, from which we gain impressions of the workings and atmosphere of Alfred's kingship. We saw one example above, in the forest parable, and these glossaries of analogies and allusions have been much mined by modern editors for information on contemporary life. In addition to Asser's *Life*, there appear familiar extracts from *The Consolation*, the preface to *Pastoral Care*, the king's Laws, his Will, and other Alfredian miscellanea in most general histories and in many specialist works in various Anglo-Saxon fields, literary and diplomatic. Hence we are used to phrases such as: 'the first reference in English to' (for instance) the opening of Alfred's preface as the writ protocol; we might read that by the late ninth century a king's thegn could expect to replace his leased land (*lænland*) eventually with bookland (*bocland*); or, that Alfred regarded his people as being one of three orders or classes, again with the familiar legend: 'it appears to be attested for the first time here in Alfred's translation'; and of course, as already examined, critics have made variable uses of Alfred's reference to Weland. On a variety of subjects, therefore, an Alfredian perspective is either somewhere expected or is the starting point. So richly encyclopaedic does the king's work appear, we might be forgiven for asking an unscholarly question: if a subject existed in the area of Anglo-Saxon affairs — up to the late ninth-century — why can we not find it referred to somewhere in 'Alfred'? Despite the usual dangers of arguing from silence it is a question that will be revived later in respect of the conspicuous absence of reference to the Germanic-heroic, save the aforementioned reference to Weland. One immediate response might be that it was religiously expedient of Alfred to ignore the heroic (pagan) world that was perhaps still a strong attraction in late ninth-century

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41 Preface to *Soliloquies*, Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, 139.
England, though from the opening parts of this paper it was argued that far from ignoring certain elements of the heroic ethic such as the pursuit of fame, in *The Consolation* Alfred strongly confronts them; in no area does Alfred avoid what we might call difficult subject matter. In this respect, for instance, we could contrast Alfred’s approach with that of another Anglo-Saxon encyclopaedic source, the Venerable Bede.

We might expect to be able to ask of Bede a similar unscholarly question as that above. He is closer chronologically to our imagined idea of an heroic golden age than is Alfred; so where are the pagan heroes in Bede? Patrick Wormald has demonstrated just how unrewarding is such a search in Bede’s work. Bede’s imperatives obviated any deep probing of the awkward, such as details of the Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs, or even less sensitive areas such as the Germanic heroes. Nothing survives of Bede’s attested vernacular work, and in the *Ecclesiastical history*, even when Bede reports the miracle of Caedmon’s vernacular poetry he does not break his ecclesiastical convention by repeating Caedmon’s song in English (Bede supplies a Latin paraphrase, explaining that the beauty and dignity of poetry would be lost by literal translation). Whatever he knew of pagan mythology Bede mostly dismissed with silence. A similar reticence is reflected in his reports of the early English tribes and kings, where his account, though the best we have, is neither lengthy nor seems to reflect the world of *Beowulf*. We, for instance, might imagine that Woden would have retained a certain prominence (that is, residual status); after all he survived the Christian conversion in many placenames, such as Woodnesborough (*Wodnesbeorge*), and Wednesfield (*Wodnesfeld*), and has endured well as our mid-week day name, unlike the inelegant German *Mittwoch*. One will search in vain for an etymology of Wednesday in the *Ecclesiastical history* where Bede’s usual practice is merely to number the days: Wednesday being the ‘III’ day. The solitary reference to Woden himself reveals not a hint of a status greater than the distinguished ancestor of several royal families, including that of Hengist and Horsa. Though as a historian Bede deals informatively with events in the barbarian lands which are his subject, he has no interest in providing a manual of their culture. He follows strictly in the footsteps of the Latin and Greek Fathers: *iuxta vestigia patrum*.

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43 'Bede turned upon the heroes of the English pre-Christian past his unrivalled capacity for withering silence', Wormald, 'Bede, “Beowulf” and the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy', 60.
46 *Historia ecclesiastica*, i, 15; Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 50.
Alfred is different. Nevertheless, he is likely to have studied and admired Bede, and although this paper is not the place to examine the role of the Old English version in the Alfredian programme, it can be proposed that in certain respects Alfred may have paid implicit acknowledgements to Bede, not least in his fulfilment of one of Bede's last imperatives as expressed in a letter to Egbert, archbishop of York, dating to the year before Bede's death (734), that priests and teachers should say and repeat the Lord's Prayer and the Creed in the vernacular to 'those who are acquainted with no language but their own';\(^{48}\) and it is certainly relevant to note here that in his opening paragraphs to Egbert, Bede had urged him to read, amongst other works, the *Book of the Pastoral Care*. However, as an author, Alfred was a man of his own age, his educational ideas strongly influenced by the leading school of his day. Again, unlike Bede, his method was not to condemn by silence but to expose a false concept, and in *The Consolation*, destroy its value by argument, dialectic or parable. (Further examples are examined in the final section below). Alfred was of course also a secular, worldly man, and would draw upon any avenue of his experience to explain a concept. Ruth Waterhouse directs us towards one example where Alfred engages what may be a unique reference in Old English to sensual love. In his translation of the *Soliloquies*, where Augustine had made a cerebral, intellectual metaphor that the lover of wisdom must grasp her charms unveiled, Alfred augmented this with a physical and sensitive elaboration: 'Do you not know that every man who loves another very much loves better to caress and kiss the other on the bare body, than where clothes are between?\(^{49}\)

In acknowledging King Alfred's willingness to confront a difficult subject or concept we return to the dilemma presented in the conflicting views concerning Weland. In chapter 22 of the *Life* we learn of Alfred's love of English poetry; he even won the book prize. From chapter 75 we see Alfred transferring this enthusiasm to his children. Peter Clemoes, as we saw above, pointed us towards Alfred's probable debt, in terms of certain vocabulary, to vernacular poetry.\(^{50}\) Yet in seeking for something more substantial we find that the sole reference in his own works to any Germanic heroic figure rings out in its singularity. Alfred had not summoned Weland in what we regard as his legendary connections with King Nithhad, as we find in the Old English poem *Deor*, and the eclectic iconography of the carved whalebone box known as the Frank's Casket (now in the British Museum), both of which place our hero in a setting similar

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49 Translated in Ruth Waterhouse, 'Tone in Alfred's version of Augustine's *Soliloquies*', *Studies*, ed. Szarmach, 47-85, at 83, n.31; the Old English reads: 'Hu ne wost du nu þæt ælc þæt manna þe oðerne swiðe lufað, þæt hine lyst þet þaccian and cyssan ðone oðerne on þæt lic, þonne þæt þæt cladæs beotweona bæð? ' (*Soliloquies*, 75).
50 Clemoes, 'Alfred's debt', *passim*. 
to the Scandinavian legend of Volundr in the *Volundarkviða*, none of which we can assume Alfred knew; and it must be restated that this unique reference comes after two chapters of unambiguous disapproval of 'idle renown' and 'useless vainglory'. We might be confident after all this in suggesting that the poetry Alfred is said to have loved is more likely to have been Aldhelmian than Beowulfian.\(^{31}\) Ruth Waterhouse demonstrated above that Alfred did not avoid addressing difficult subject matter. Once more it is tempting to ask, if there is no reference to a subject (including *Beowulf*) somewhere in 'Alfred', and he was unlikely to be self-censoring, Bede-style, then that subject was: no longer 'in the air'; was an esoteric cult;\(^{52}\) or just as likely, was not yet composed.

**How Boethian was Alfred? How Boethian is 'Beowulf'**

From this point we must proceed from the machinery and motives, to examine some examples of King Alfred's textual contribution. This has often been identified and assessed in terms of the differences or changes between the Old English book and Boethius's original; to an extent it will be here too. One such change was the explicitly stated Christianity in Alfred's version. Other related changes can be seen in characterization of his leading players, *Wisdom* and *Mod*, and the way Alfred came to name them. There is little unanimity among the critics concerning the characterization of *Wisdom* (Boethius's Lady Philosophy), though there can be little doubt that Alfred did establish a character for *Wisdom* very early in his text. It also seems reasonable to imagine that Alfred would have identified personally with each of his characters at different points in the book depending on the context of particular chapters or lessons. It will also be appropriate here to consider two elements relating to what have been claimed as Boethian ideas or influence in *Beowulf*. Firstly, it is worthwhile to examine how *The Consolation* and *Beowulf* treat certain key words and concepts relevant to the direction of my argument concerning Alfred's focus. Notoriously difficult in this respect is *wyrd*, also, the force or *persona* of Death often associated with *wyrd*. The extent to which Alfred may have modernized the concept of *wyrd* could be seen to be an important test of how much he avoided the determinist outlook so dominant in our perception of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ethic, which, it will be argued, is the concept of *wyrd* found so often in *Beowulf*. Secondly, there will be an examination of the varying moods of the motif known as *ubi sunt*, since this too can highlight the contrasting approaches of our two authors.


Alfred's innovations and changes in his version of *The Consolation* had pragmatic objectives, created around the need to present a more noticeably Christian version relevant to the relatively unsophisticated reader or audience of late ninth-century England. Alfred's method built upon that of Boethius himself inasmuch as it too was eclectic; as was noted above, Alfred drew together ideas from a number of the authors he favoured, not only Boethius but among others Augustine and Gregory. W.F. Bolton, however, sees the number of changes that Alfred made, as limited. He argues that Alfred and his helpers probably worked through a number of layers of mediation or commentary. The emphasis of Bolton's paper is that the source of whatever *Consolatio* used was ultimately derived from Alcuin, since it was Alcuin who had rediscovered the *Consolatio* in Rome and 'conveyed a Christianized Boethius to the next several centuries'. An Alcuinian Boethius would of course have been an overriding mediation influencing ninth-century carolingian 'editions' of Boethius, but in determining whether a change in the Old English version is from Alfred and his circle or is traceable in a Carolingian manuscript he may have used, we might be guided by the assessment of the surviving copies of Boethius, made by Wittig in 1983. He argues that the glosses and commentaries seen in these manuscripts cannot fully account for many of the changes and references in Alfred's text. In an analysis of the glosses of forty-five manuscripts, Wittig broadly acknowledges their value about 'information widely available, about current interpretations of the text ...', though he rejects them as the source of Alfred's alterations which he considers reveal a knowledge of a greater range of writings among the Alfredian circle than is reflected in the manuscripts he has examined. In the absence therefore of an identifiable source for the innovations in the Old English version, we surely may proceed from the (working) assumption that the changes were from Alfred and his advisors.

Anne Payne suggests one innovation around which the core of the Alfredian philosophical outlook might be determined. Alfred avoided Boethius's personification of *Fortuna* and substituted two impersonal forces; these he called *wyrd*, ultimately part of God's work, and *woruldselda*, which represents the mutable gifts associated with (good) fortune. Payne argues that the significant element in

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53 For a review of the various opinions on Alfred's method and changes, see Joseph B. Traherne, Jun., 'Fatalism and the millennium', *Cambridge companion*, eds Godden and Lapidge, 160-71.

54 Lerer suggests Alfred learned this method from Asser (*Literacy and power*, 95-6).

55 Bolton, 'How Boethian is Alfred's *Boethius*?', passim.

56 Ibid., 161.

57 Wittig, 'Alfred's Boethius'.

58 Ibid., 185.

Alfred's overtly Christian version comes from the transference of the work of Boethian fate more directly to God himself. Payne suggests that Alfred's version shows a different concept of God: a deity very much involved in the temporal universe, working each day by two manifestations of his power: the first is divine forethought, God's work on a grand scale, and the second, wyrd, 'the immediate, daily, contingent permutations ... within the boundaries of what is ordained'. One of the more intriguing of Alfred's indisputable innovations can be seen in his characterizations. The 'figure' of Modis straightforward, being the mind of Boethius (as prisoner) himself. With Boethius's plight in historical reality, Alfred did take something of a liberty, specifically regarding the relevance of the charges of treason levelled against him. Boethius denied all charges of treason whereas Alfred saw justification, possibly something to be proud of, in parading Boethius's alleged conspiracy as the just rebellion of a principled 'Roman' Christian against the cruel and heretical Arian (Christian) Theodoric.

Of Wisdom there have been contrasting views, even disagreement as to the gender of this character. Sedgefield in his simplified translation of 1900 ('done into modern English'), avoided the considerable subtlety of Alfred's character and just reverted to the name in Boethius's original, Lady Philosophy. Allen Frantzen suggests that Wisdom is a daunting lady 'with the severity that characterizes her throughout the work'. Contrariwise, Janet Bately sees the figure of Wisdom as quite approachable: 'a kindly Wisdom, who is ever eager to succor ... '; and Seth Lerer would have us understand that Alfred not only changed the name but also changed her gender to male! Alfred faced something of a spiritual dilemma with Boethius's figure of Lady Philosophy. In the original she is a towering, powerful figure coming from the same classical, pre-Christian origins as Fortuna. Such a character would need transformation to be accommodated in Alfred's overtly Christian version. In his adaptation Alfred seems to have required a composite character. He certainly needed a figure of authority, a teacher who could dismiss old ideas dominated by superstition. To balance the authoritarian side of his Wisdom, Alfred added a voice possessing qualities of feminine consolation. His solution therefore, was to give his character two voices, more often called Wisdom, but sometimes called Gesceadwisnes — the spirit of Reason within Wisdom. Alfred's models for his character may have been sought from diverse authors: perhaps partially Augustinian (Augustine is instructed by 'Reason')

60 Payne, Alfred and Boethius, 90-1.
61 Sedgefield, Old English Boethius, 7, lines 17-24.
62 Frantzen, King Alfred, 50.
63 Bately, 'Those books', 51.
64 Lerer, Literacy and power, 80.
in the *Soliloquies*), though there may be biblical influence too. For instance, in the book of Proverbs there is a model of Wisdom, companion to God: ‘... then I was beside him, like a master workman’. It might be misleading however, to extend the two voices into a twin characterization, since they belong to one figure who ought not perhaps to be over-personified in any case. *Wisdom* therefore is a complex character, nevertheless, from the opening chapter Alfred clearly established the characterization he required: Boethius (Alfred’s *Mod*) lies prostrate in his cell, *Wisdom* appears, *adrigde þa mīnes modes eagan þ hit fran bliþu wordu hwæðer hit oncenoeowe his fostermodor* (‘drying its eyes, she asked it cheerily whether it knew again its fostermother’). Alfred portrayed his *Wisdom* from the outset as a fostermother. We can only accept her fundamental maternal nature, and as Janet Bately has observed, kindly disposition. Later and when appropriate, *Wisdom* will be equally magisterial. Just as Alfred imposed a blend of character on his figures, it is reasonable to imagine him at times in the dialogue identifying with his players. For example, in chapter XVII, as a worldly man who had himself suffered adversity and many reversals of fortune, Alfred might strongly identify with *Mod*, though as leader of his people he could not share the lofty levels of *contemptus mundi* shown by Boethius in his cell. Alfred regarded worldly goods as the necessary tools for his kingly crafts: *buton tola ic wilnode peah 7 andweorces to þa weorc þe me beboden was to wyrccanne* (‘but I desired instruments and materials to carry out the work I was set to do’). In other of the lessons we might suspect that Alfred preferred to identify with *Wisdom*. In chapter XIX, and when addressing a wider audience, once more she is uncompromising in warning men of the folly in pursuing fame:

Æala, ofermodan, hwi ge wilnigen þ ge underlutan mid eowrū swiran þ deallice geoc? oðde hwi ge seon on swa idelan geswince ...

O ye proud ones, why do ye desire to put your necks under that deadly yoke? or why are ye at such idle pains to spread your fame ...

The tone here is anti-heroic and it is pedagogical, but is it severe or daunting, as Frantzen suggests? Despite these occasional strictures the personality of *Wisdom* is usually that of a kindly teacher and notwithstanding grammatical gender (*wisdom* being a masculine noun), she is a fostermother and is soon recognized by *Mod* as his

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65 See for instance, Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, 139-52.
66 Prov. 8:30 (Revised Standard version).
67 Sedgefield, *Old English Boethius*, 8, lines 25-7; Sedgefield (trans.), *Boethius*, 3.
68 Sedgefield, *Old English Boethius*, 40, lines 9-10; Sedgefield (trans.), *Boethius*, 41.
69 Sedgefield, *Old English Boethius*, 46, lines 7-9; Sedgefield (trans.), *Boethius*, 47.
agne modor who comforts her erstwhile ward.\textsuperscript{70} Alfred may have varied his identification with his characters, and \textit{Wisdom} may vary her voice, but she remains a spiritual, female comforter.

Several critics have sought to identify Boethian influences in \textit{Beowulf}. In 1962 Alan Roper reviewed the current scholarship.\textsuperscript{71} He divided the critics into those convinced that concepts such as \textit{wyrd} in the poem were Boethian, and those who recognized no such connection. Roper concluded with his own definition of \textit{wyrd}, in \textit{Beowulf}, as an old, dark, deterministic force (death), to which Boethius had no contribution. More recently the Boethian connection was revived by W.F. Bolton who observed that: 'the phraseology of \textit{Beowulf} often reflects a Boethian dualism in the poet's conception',\textsuperscript{72} in \textit{Beowulf} there are several examples of what Bolton defined as the topos 'one of two things';\textsuperscript{73} this dualism is present too in the \textit{Consolation}, and Alfred enhanced or augmented it in \textit{The Consolation}.\textsuperscript{74} Bolton makes no claims as to whether where, or how the \textit{Beowulf}-poet may have acquired familiarity with Boethian ideas, from Alcuinian Latin, or Alfredian Old English.\textsuperscript{75}

Travelling somewhat in the same direction as Roper, J.D.A. Ogilvy in 1979 drew our attention to the similarity of ideas between Alfred's use of \textit{wyrd} in his \textit{Consolation} and a passage from \textit{Beowulf}.\textsuperscript{76} An examination of one of Ogilvy's examples serves here to compare or contrast differences of approach of our authors in certain key concepts relating to fate. In a paper which considered Anglo-Saxon culture in the context of Christian values, Ogilvy argued that in the following examples, while death and \textit{wyrd} are both inevitable, the effect of both can be deferred:

\begin{verbatim}
7 men magon begitan burn bone freedom swa hwæt swa hi willað, buton dead hi ne magon forcerran; æc hi hine magon mid goodu weorcum gelettan þe he be lator cymd.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{verbatim}

Men may by virtue of this freedom compass whatsoever they please, but Death they cannot escape. Still, they can keep him back with good deeds, so that he comes later.

\textsuperscript{70} Sedgefield, \textit{Old English Boethius}, 9, line 1; Sedgefield (trans.), \textit{Boethius}, 3.
\textsuperscript{71} Alan H. Roper, 'Boethius and the three fates of \textit{Beowulf}', \textit{Philological Quarterly}, xli (1962), 386-400.
\textsuperscript{73} Bolton, 'Boethius and a topos', 16.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 26-7.\textsuperscript{75}
\textsuperscript{76} In another paper, however, Bolton argues that it was Alfred who introduced \textit{The Consolation} to England. Given that Alfred wrote probably in the mid-890s, if Bolton's claims of a Boethian \textit{Beowulf} are correct, then the poem might be more plausibly attributed to the early tenth century than earlier; see Bolton, 'How Boethian is Alfred's \textit{Boethius}?', 163.
\textsuperscript{77} J.D.A. Ogilvy, 'Beowulf and Alfred on \textit{wyrd} and worldly glory', \textit{Saints, scholars}, eds King and Stevens, i, 59-66, at 61.
\textsuperscript{77} Sedgefield, \textit{Old English Boethius}, 142, lines 15-18; Sedgefield (trans.), \textit{Boethius}, 167.
Ogilvy compares this with a famous passage in *Beowulf*: *Wyrd oft nered unþægne eorl, þonne his ellen déah!* ('*Wyrd* often spares the undoomed man when his courage endures'). If, like Ogilvy, we hear echoes in these aphorisms then we might try to determine if there are common factors. We must concede that in both examples there is a common element, which is an event: death temporarily withheld; but is there a common concept between *wyrd* here and Alfred's reference to *deáð* in this example? (Sedgefield's capitalization, 'Death', conveys a personification which may not be present in the Alfredian text.) For concept however, we must look to the contexts of each of the authors' examples since they reveal a polarity in their respective words, and in close proximity in his grace gives men freedom to act and authors' intentions. Behind Alfred's words, and in close proximity in his text, is the presumption that God's grace gives men freedom to act; there can be no sense of a man's number being up. The first thing to be noted about the context of the *Beowulf* lines is that the words are not from the poet as Christian narrator, but are Beowulf's youthful words from his boastful speech to Unferth. Beowulf of course is, like the poem's other characters, a heathen knowing nothing of God's grace: *ne wiston hie Drihten God*, and though his perception of the force he calls *wyrd* is undefined, it seems to be a lurking, unknown force granting or snatching away lives by the approval of heroic acts. From Beowulf's words we are forced to recognize something else: that men are divided between the doomed and the undoomed (*unþægne*); this is the determinist ethic in *Beowulf*, and courage may only withhold death if a man be also among the undoomed. This principle is axiomatic to the final act of Beowulf's life where despite his ultimate act of courage (or anyone else's), he was even so counted among the doomed. The presumptions therefore are undeniably contrary to those of Alfred who tells us that with God's grace a man has freedom to achieve what he will. Not so for Beowulf, for to be spared by *wyrd* a man has to fulfil two preconditions, one of which he can have no control over; his freedom is severely limited and his possibilities determined. The contrast can be further demonstrated under the continuing category of ethic. In *Beowulf* it is the glory and favourable memory in heroic acts which gives a man his worth (usually called *lof* and *dom*). It is the overriding ethic associated with the heroic code:

78 *Beowulf*, lines 572-3; all quotations from *Beowulf* are from F. Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and the fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950); translations are my own.


80 Ibid., 144, lines 15-16.

81 *Beowulf*, line 181.
wyrce sē þe möte
domes ār dēaþe;
unlifgendum
æfter sélst. 82

(‘let he who may achieve glory before death; that will be best afterwards for the dead noble warrior’). In The Consolation it is Christian good deeds that provide the ethic. Moreover, there is a degree of meekness which is rarely, if ever, reflected in secular poetry. If we allow Ogilvy’s quotation from The Consolation to run on a few words, the contrast is transparent: *Gif men to goodum weorce ne onhagie, hebbe goodne willan; þis is emngood* (‘If it be not in a man’s power to do a good deed, let him have the good intent, which is equally good’). 83 We could not expect to hear Beowulf compromise his heroic code in the way Alfred liberalized otherwise absolute Christian imperatives. Such progressive Christianity can be seen across the board in King Alfred’s translations where in a number of instances he strove to ameliorate the absolutes demanded of the faithful by the Fathers. 84

Despite a very different form and purpose, the Beowulf-poet had to use much the same vocabulary as Alfred. However, given the poet’s well-acknowledged antiquarian persuasion, that vocabulary provided him with words of ‘rooted’ overtone or dual meaning (ambiguity being our inheritance). One of the more problematic examples already seen is *wyrd*, and almost as mysterious is a related word, *mētod* — ‘fate’, ‘God’, ‘Creator’. Nevertheless, we can guess that the poet’s audience understood that when he used *wyrd* or *mētod* speaking as narrator, then as a Christian he was not summoning up an old Teutonic goddess of fate; but when the poet put such a word into the mouths of his pagan characters, then the audience would readily sense the presence of that older, dark, unreconstructed force, either in the form of a ‘mere body-snatcher’, as it was visualized by Bertha Phillpotts (and by adoption, Roper), 85 or the equally un-Alfredian force, ‘chance’. 86

Alfred’s tutorial in The Consolation on ‘chance’ is worthy of a lengthy aside. *Wisdom* explains that men believe some things happen ‘by chance’ (*weas*). Alfred makes a parable to deny to Chance any status as a living force. He offers the example of a hoard of gold

82 *Beowulf*, lines 1387-9.
buried in the ground. A man digging in the ground comes upon the gold. Did this happen by chance? Wisdom says not; 'by chance' means that something came from nothing:

For each thing comes from some thing, and so does not happen by chance; whereas if it came from nothing it would happen by chance. Modern English has an abundance of approximate synonyms for 'chance': for example, 'fate', 'accident', 'fortune', 'venture'. Nor can we be certain whether 'chance' itself helps us exactly with Alfred's *weas*. Such confusion can blur the simplicity of his logic, which seems to be thus: if one man had not buried the gold in a certain spot, and if the second man had not dug in precisely the same place, then no gold would have been found. By Alfred's definition this find did not happen by chance (that is, come from nothing), a fortune-based force, random and spontaneous, but was the inevitable consequence of a series of unconnected events: a delightful differentiation between chance as a force, and the coincidence of two disinterested events, truly random and of course impersonal. This example of Alfred's word-based philosophy, here, clearly locates him on the (early) humanist side of a philosophical argument. Anne Payne expresses a somewhat related sentiment: '[Alfred's] method of expressing himself exists in direct correlation to his conception of things, to his belief that men face a darkness, in which they are largely responsible for making light ... that nothing involving human action is completely decided by God'.

A final way of assessing the contrasting approaches of our two authors will be to examine the ubiquitous theme of mutability, which in differing moods is present in *Beowulf*, much Old English poetry, the *Consolatio* and *The Consolation*. The varying moods are delivered by the motif known as *ubi sunt*, which put at its simplest is regret for things lost or past. In Old English *ubi sunt* is variously introduced by: *hwæer cwom, hwæer sindon*, or *hwæt synt*, though the moods can sometimes be announced by the reflective interjection *eala!* usually translated 'alas!' A classic Boethian question can be exemplified by Alfred's rhetorical question concerning Weland, which opened this discussion: *Hwæt synt nu þæs foremeran 7 þæs wisan ban Welandes?* This mood is not particularly melancholic, more perhaps a didactic device to explain that what is finite is inevitably corruptible; and as was argued above, there is no element of regret

87 Sedgefield, *Old English Boethius*, 140, lines 4-6; Sedgefield (trans.), *Boethius*, 164.
88 Payne, *Alfred and Boethius*, 142.
or nostalgia for the heroic in this use of *ubi sunt*. It is solely a warning to the audience against the seduction of fame: what was left of Weland but 'meagre fame and a name writ with a few letters?' It is a mood uncompromised by ambition or materialism, a mood therefore, for Alfred here, wholly consonant with the bereft condition of Boethius in his cell.

A second mood is quite different and pervasive in *Beowulf*: a deep regret at the passing of good fortune, the material prosperity associated with the joys of the hall. No better example can be offered than the elegy spoken by the last survivor:

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gomen gleobēames,  nē  gōd hafoc
geond sæl swingedē,  nē  se swiftda mearl
burhstede bēateō. 89
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[Now] there was no joy from the harp; no pleasure from that happy instrument. Nor does the good hawk swoop through the hall, nor the swift horse clatter in the courtyard.

A somewhat similar melancholy is expressed by the young *eardstapa* in his inexperienced, and certainly un-Boethian voice in the elegiac poem *The Wanderer*. 90

Bertha Phillpotts proposed the presence of another mood in late Anglo-Saxon literature, one which we could probably call a transitional variation of *ubi sunt*. 91 This mood seems to embrace Christianity and possibly Boethian logic too. It includes an understanding of the inevitable mutability of all worldly states; yet there are also elements of pessimism, resignation and melancholy. Such a complex mood can be recognized in the words of the *snottor on mod*, that most erudite of the voices in *The Wanderer*: *Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!* ('Alas the bright cup! Alas the armoured warrior!') 92 This mood, suggested Katherine Propp in 1973, effuses occasionally from *The Consolation*: 93 *Eala þ nanwuht nis faeste stondendes weorces a wuniende on worulde* (Alas! there is nothing in the world that endureth firmly for ever!). 94 Certain observations and distinctions can be made. The first is that Phillpotts's proposal of a transitional mood presumes the usual, perhaps expected transition

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89 *Beowulf*, lines 2262-5.
91 Phillpotts, 'Wyrd and providence', 13.
92 *The Wanderer*, line 94.
94 Sedgefield, *Old English Boethius*, 21, lines 8-9; Sedgefield (trans.), *Boethius*, 19.
from the heroic to the Boethian. Can we any longer place a transition in that order? It may be just as likely, as Audrey Meaney argued in the T. Northcote Toller Memorial lecture of 1988, or as Alexander Callander Murray argued in 1981, that the Beowulf-poet was a product of very late antiquarian persuasions. Given this, then the mood that Bertha Phillpotts identified is probably influenced by the heroic, the elegiac, and even the Boethian. Can distinctions be made then between the two examples cited above by Katherine Proppe from The Wanderer and The Consolation? They are both introduced by the formulaic *eala*, so regret of some kind seems to be signalled in both. The Wanderer, until the final consolation speech of the narrator, regrets loss of the heroic world, and in our extract the poet's synecdoche allows two favoured elements ('bright cup', and 'armoured warrior') to represent that whole world. Indeed, prior to the final speech the poem almost drips with the melancholy of the young warrior and the regret of the *snottor on mod*. Even on the briefest perusal Alfred's *eala* does not seem to express the same regret, nostalgia or melancholy. First it should be noted that the melancholic translation, 'alas', can only very loosely approximate to Alfred's *eala*, since 'alas' derives from Old French *ah!* plus *las*, from Latin *lassum*, 'weary'. In context Alfred's *eala*, sometimes also translated 'oh! lo!', here seems little more than the weary shrug of his shoulders. There is clearly no regret for the loss of any of the elements of the heroic world. Alfred's regret (if regret it be), as that of Boethius, amounts to no more than didactic impatience, an appeal for wise realism: nothing lasts for ever! *Ubi sunt* therefore, whilst being a useful area for extending our search for Alfred's direction, must be regarded as a very flexible device rather than a single mood; clearly the context of the examples above varies between frustration, *ennui* and melancholy.

How Boethian therefore are our two heroes? Alfred is of course, as we should expect, a fully Boethian man, though not a revisited sixth-century, classical Boethian. He is, for instance, less fatalistic, indeed, probably non-fatalistic, and like all good administrators, an optimist. Many of the changes we have examined were made to suit the circumstances of his age and tradition, very different from those of Boethius. There is a certain irony, too, in that when Alfred came to translate the Consolatio, as a successful king of an expanding kingdom, he was more in the position of a Theodoric than of a

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97 The Wanderer, lines 112-15.
Boethius. In their respective travails in life however, we can propose certain parallels, not least in the efforts of the two men to prevent their ancient institutions from collapsing around them. In this respect Alfred was unrivalled in the late-Saxon period, the greater territorial expansions of his descendants being undoubtedly built upon the foundations of his reign. When looking at Alfred as scholar we can easily forget that he was, too, a ninth-century, north European warrior in a country which had little tradition of philosophical scholarship, vernacular prose, practice of translation, and, not least, (recent) scholarship among laymen. The king imposed a new kind of order to England in all these areas and in a very short period. It is out of these circumstances that we should assess his engagement with the universally difficult concepts examined above. These are no more than the criteria by which Alfred, with characteristic modesty, beseeches us to judge him: ‘according to the capacity of his intellect and the amount of time available to him’. 99

Whether there are Boethian elements in Beowulf must remain a conundrum involving context, source and date, though it seems plausible that (post-Alfedian?) Boethian influence permeates parts of poems such as The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and probably Deor, for despite their undoubtedly hybrid elements they are usually regarded, at least in their conclusions, as consolation literature. 100 Whether we can consider Beowulf himself as a Boethian projection is even more doubtful. We cannot assume that the universal dignity that the poet awarded his hero at his death (Beowulf received the most exalted of pagan rites, though was acknowledged to be subject to the judgement of God)101 necessarily extends to being Boethian, since it is what the living hero himself perceived of the world that must be the criterion here. The hero who advocated only ‘domes àr déape’102 knew neither Christian nor Platonic consolation.

Alfredus Rex Magnanimus

When reviewing King Alfred’s aspirations to educate his people in the context of the reform programme as a whole, it seems perverse not to be dazzled by his idealism, especially given the historical context of the perilous conditions of the last of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It is the one place in this argument where it is appropriate to suspend its direction and use the word ‘heroic’. Given this, it is perhaps churlish to assess the quality of his literary work.

99 Preface to The Consolation, Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred, 132.
101 For Beowulf’s pagan funeral rites, see lines 3137-3182. For his implied Christian judgement by God, lines 2819-20: ‘him of hraedre gewat sáwol sæcean sóðfæstra dóm.’ (‘the soul departed from [his] breast to seek the judgement of the righteous.’
102 Beowulf, line 1388.
Nevertheless, Dorothy Whitelock and more recently Janet Bately, amongst other critics, have judged Alfred’s pioneering efforts generously, justifying one of his commonly-cited soubriquets, the father of English prose. Furthermore, Seth Lerer has revealed a surprising degree of sophistication in Alfred’s understanding of the power and sheer usefulness of authorship, not least as the way authors converse with each other, and audiences, down the ages.

In concluding this search for Alfred’s literary locus we can propose that his own sweæd can yet be seen among the very contrasts that have been debated above. If *The Consolation* can be said to have been Alfred’s major literary occupation, and probably, achievement, then by embracing and augmenting its messages, he would, had he felt any attraction for the heroic world, have been compelled to abandon it. We might too in the end propose that King Alfred’s programme had one singularly great achievement. It was that a king of such historical importance dignified his own language with books of such universally high moral and intellectual tone. Bernard Huppe has charted some parallels between Alfred’s preface to *Pastoral Care* and Ælfric’s preface to his translation of Genesis. It is to Alfred’s example that Ælfric and his patron Æthelweard looked a century later. Huppé is convinced that Ælfric responded to a model of great teaching in Alfred’s work. He concludes that if we are to understand the roots of English prose style, we might study one preface as the culmination of the other: ‘What Alfred created, Ælfric completed’.


104 Lerer, *Literacy and power*, 88, 95, 96.
