

Information

THE WANDERER

The lament of *The Wanderer* is an excellent example of the elegiac mood so common in Old English poetry. The loss of a lord, of companions in arms, of a mead hall (in which Anglo-Saxon life realized itself to the full) are themes that enhance the melancholy tone of *Beowulf* as they are the emotional basis for such a poem as the present one. But nowhere more poignantly expressed than in *The Wanderer* is the loneliness of the exile in search of a new lord and hall; this is what Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, would have suffered, had it not been for Hrothgar's hospitality. To the wretched seeker all weather is wintry, for nature seems to conspire to match a man's mood as he moves over the water from one land to another, yearning for a home and kin to replace those vanished ones that still fill his thoughts.

As is true of most Old English elegiac laments, both the language and the structure of *The Wanderer* are difficult. At the beginning the speaker (whom the poet identifies as an "earth-walker") voices hope of finding comfort after his many tribulations. After the poet's interruption, the wanderer continues to speak—to himself—of his long search for a new home, describing how he must keep his thoughts locked within him while he makes his search. But these thoughts form the most vivid and moving part of his soliloquy—how, floating on the sea, dazed with sorrow and fatigue, he imagines that he sees his old companions, and how, as he wakens to reality, they vanish over the water like seabirds. The second part of the poem, beginning with the seventh paragraph ("Therefore I cannot think why . . ."), expands the theme from one man to all human beings in a world wasted by war and time, and the speaker draws philosophical implications from his harsh experiences (presumably now in the past). He derives such cold comfort as he can from asking the old question *Ubi sunt?*—where

are they who were once so glad to be alive? And he concludes with the thought that "all this earthly habitation shall be emptied" of humankind. The narrator communes with himself in private, apparently as an indication of his detachment from life. The poem concludes with a characteristic Old English injunction to practice restraint on earth, place hope only in heaven.

The Wanderer is preserved only in the Exeter Book, a manuscript copied about 975, which contains the largest surviving collection of Old English poetry.

THE WANDERER

oft him an hwa are gebled,
 Metudes miltse, beah þa he modcearig
 geond lagulade, longe scealde
 hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ,
 wadan wræclastas: wyrð bið ful aræd!
 Sæc hæð eardstapā, eateþa gemyndig,
 wraþra wælsleahla ylnemagā hryre.

Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce
 mine ceare cwlpan - nis nu cwlra nān
 þe ic him modsefan minne durtē
 sweotule asagan: ic to soþe wāt
 þæt hīp in softe indryhten þearf
 þæt he his ferdlocan fæste blinde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycga swa he willa.
 He mag wealg mod wyrda wistondan,
 ne sa hreo hyga helpe gefremman;
 forðon domgeorne dreorige oft
 in hyra breostcofan blindad fæste,

The Wanderer

The solitary one solicits oft the grace,
 the mercy of the Measurer, though sad at heart
 across the watery way a weary while must he
 stir with his hands the rime-cold sea,
 tread exile tracks: full pitiless is fate!

Thus quoth a wanderer, mindful of woes,
 ferocious carnage, kinsmen massacred.
 Oft have I had alone at every dawn
 my sorrows to lament - none living now is there
 to whom my heart I dare
 openly declare. I truly know
 it is a noble custom in an eorl
 that he bind fast his breast,
 his broodings hold, think what he will,
 A weary mind withstands not fate,
 nor does a rueful heart yield help:
 hence those ambitious oft-times sad
 fast fetter in their breasts,

swa ic modsefan minne sceolde
 (oft earmearely, æðle biddað,
 fromægum feor) fetorum sælan;
 sibban geara iu goldwylne minne
 hrusan heolstre blwrah; ond ic hean þonan
 wod wintercearig ofer wabema gebind,
 sohte seledreorig sinces bryttan,
 hwar ic feor opbe neah findan meahte
 þone þe in meoduwealle minna myne wisa,
 opbe meo freondleasne frefran wolde,
 wenlan mid wynnun. Wat se þe cunnað
 hu sibben bið sorg to gefaran
 þam þe him lyt hafað leofra geholena;
 werað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold;
 fardloca feorrig, nales foldan blad;
 gemon he setascegas ond slincege,
 hu hine on geoguðas his goldwylne

as I should thoughts of mine
 (oft careworn, of my native land deprived,
 far from free kinsfolk) with shackles bind,
 since long ago my lavish lord
 in darkness earth enfolded, and I abject thence
 fared winter-sad across the frozen waves,
 sought sorrowful the hall of a gold-giver,
 where I might find, or far or near,
 him in mead-hall who would know my thought,
 or comfort friendless me,
 with kindness treat. He knows who trial makes
 of grief how cruel a comrade it can be
 for one who has few bosom friends;
 the exile-track engrosses him, not twisted gold;
 a frozen heart, not splendour of the earth;
 he recalls retainers and receiving gifts,
 how in his youth his lavish lord

menade to wiste - wyn eal gedreast
forþon wat se þe sceal his winedryhtnes
leofas larculdum longe forþollan.

þonne sorg ond sleep somod atgyðre
earnme anhogan oft geblindað,
þinceð him on mode þat he his mondryhten
clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo læge
honda ond heafod, swa he hwillum ær
in geardagum glefstolas breac!

ðonne onwæcneð eft winelæs guma,
gestið him biþ foran fealwæges,
bapian brimfugas, bræðan febrs,
breesan brim ond snaw hagle gemenged,
þonne beoð by hefigran heortan þanne,
sare æfter swæne - sorg bið genlrad -
þonne mega gemynd mod geonðhwærfed,
greted gllwatafum, georne geondscæwad.
sæga geseldan swimmed eft onweg,
fleotendra forð no þar fela bringed
cudra cwidegleda - cearo bið genlrad -

was wont to feasting him - that joy has perished quite!
This he knows who must his friendly lord's
beloved precepts long forgo.

When together grieve and sleep
the wretched reculse often blind,
in thought to him it seems his liege lord he
is clasping, kissing, laying upon his knee
his hands and head, as willow he
in days of yore the gift-throne's boons enjoyed;
then wakes the friendless man again,
sees before him fallow waves,
bathing sea-birds, preening wings,
frost and snow hail-mingled fall.
Heavier are the heart's wounds then,
for his beloved sore - sorrow is renewed -
when the memory of kinsmen crosses his mind
he greets them gleefully, eagerly watches
his warrior comrades; they drift away again.
The spirit of seafarers brings there not many
familiar songs - care is renewed -

þam þe wendan sceal swiþe gennasahhe
 ofer waberna geblind werlgne sætan.
 Forþon ic gepencan ne mag geond þas woruld
 forþran medasfa min næ geseorce,
 þonne ic eorla lif eal geondþence,
 þu hl færllice flet ofgeafon,
 modge magupþegnas, swa þas mildangearð
 ealra dogra gehwam draosed ond fealleþ.
 Forþon ne mag weorþan wls wer, ær he age
 wintra dal in woruldrice. Wlta sceal geþryldig:
 ne sceal no to hethort, ne to hradwyrde,
 ne to wac wiga, ne to wanhlydig,
 ne to forht, ne to fægen, ne to feohgifre,
 ne næfre gelfres to gearn, ær he geara cunne;
 beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spriceð,
 obþæt, coltenferð, cunne gearwe
 hwider hreþra gebyrd hwearfan wille.

to him who oft enough must send
 over the frozen waves his weary heart.
 And so I cannot think why in this world
 my spirit grows not sad,
 when I consider close the life of eorls,
 how suddenly they yielded up the hall,
 high-spirited young thanes; just so, this middle-earth
 falls each and every day and falls.
 Assuredly, a man may not turn wise, ere he possess
 his share of winters in the world. A wise man must be calm:
 he must neither be too passionate, nor too rash of speech,
 nor too weak a warrior, nor too precipitate,
 nor too timid, nor too eager, nor too greedy for gain,
 never to boast too keen, ere he know well:
 a man must wait, when vow he makes,
 until, for action fit, he truly knows
 whither his heart's aims will incline.

Ongloetan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið,
 þonne ealre þisse worulde wala waste stondeð,
 swa nu missenlice geond þissne middangeard,
 wylde bliwune, weallas stondeþ
 hrime bliworene, hryðga þa aderas.
 Monlað þa winaslo, waldend licgað
 dreame biðrorene, dugup eal gæcrong
 wlonc bi wealle. Sume wig fornrom,
 ferede in forðweg; sumne fugel oþbar
 ofer hæmne holm; sumne se hara wulf
 deaðe gedelde; sumne dreorightlæor
 in eorðacrafæ eorl gehyðde.
 Yrðe swa þissne eardgeard wida sceppend
 oþbat, burgwara breahma leaze,
 eald enta geweorc idlu stodon:
 Se þonne þissne wealsteal wisa gepohle,
 ond his deorce lif deope geandþencde,
 frod in ferde, feor oft gemon
 wælsleahla worn, ond þas word acwilde:
 Iwar cwm mearg? Iwar cwm mago? Iwar cwm
 mabpungfa?

A prudent hero must perceive how hideous it will be,
 when all this world of wealth stands waste,
 as now, in varied places through this middle-earth,
 blown on by winds, stand walls
 time-girt, the courts snow-swept.
 The wine halls crumble, lords lie low
 deprived of mirth, the doughty troop all dead
 brave by the wall. War wasted one,
 fetched him away: one the bird bore
 across the deep sea; one the hoar wolf
 rent to death; one sad of mien,
 in cave of earth, a warrior hid.
 Thus did the Creator of men lay waste this world
 until, bereft of their folk's revelry,
 the ancient work of giants idle stood.
 Then he who wisely ponders this foundation-wall,
 and deeply thinks on every aspect of this darksome life,
 sage in spirit, oft from far recalls
 the many battles, and declares these words:
 Where is the steed gone? Where is the rider? where is
 the giver of gifts?

Hwær cwm sýmbles geseaſu? Hwær slindon seladreamas?
 Eala beorht buns! Eala byrnwiga!
 Eala broodnes byrni! Hu seo prag gewat,
 genap under niðhalum, swa heo no wære!
 Stonded nu on laste leofre dugupe
 weal wundrum heah wyrmlcum fah -
 eorlas fornomon asca byrpe,
 wepen wealgifu, wurd seo mære -
 ond þas stanheofu stormas cnyssað;
 hrið hreosaðde hrusan blinded;
 wintres woma (þonne won cymed,
 niþed, niðscua) norþan onstended
 hreo hæglfare hæleþum on andan.
 Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice:
 onwended wyrda geseaft weoruld under heofonum.
 Her bið feoh lene, her bið freond lene,

Where are the banqueting seats? Where are the joys of hall?
 Alas the bright goblet! Alas the mailed warrior!
 Alas the lord's majesty! How that time's passed away,
 Grown dark neath shades of night, as though it never were!
 There stands as token now to that beloved troop
 a wondrous high wall, decked with serpent shapes -
 a host of spears snatched away the eorls,
 weapons greedy for carnage, a glorious fate -
 and storms strike these stony slopes,
 the falling snow-storm fetters the earth;
 winter's tumult (when the darkness comes,
 casts gloom, the shades of night) sends from the north
 fierce driving hail in malice towards men.
 All the realm of earth is wearisome;
 the decree of fate changes the world beneath the sky.
 Here wealth is brief, here friend short-lived,

her bið mon lene; her bið meȝ lene;
 eal þis worþan geaſtael 1del weorþeð.
Swa cweð anottor on mode, gaſet him ſundor at rune.
 Tll biþ ær þa his treowe gehealdeþ. He ſceal næfre his
 torn to ryce
 beorn of his breoſtum acþan, nempa he ær þa boða
 cunne,
 eorl, mid eþne geſremman. Wel bið þam þa him ære ſcead,
 frofre to fader on heofonum, þær us eal seo faſtning
 ſtandeð.

here man is frail, here kinsman is infirm;
 all this earth's constitution comes to naught.
 Thus quoth a wise man in his heart, in meditation as he sat
 apart.
 Blest is he who keeps his troth. Never must too hastily the wrath
 a warrior from the heart express, unless the eorl know first the
 cure,
 with courage to effect. It will be well for him who mercy seeks,
 comfort from the Father in the firmament, where for us all the
 immutable abides.

The Wanderer!

del
her's (I like
this one more)

Often the wanderer pleads for pity
and mercy from the Lord, but for a long time,
sad in mind, he must dip his oars
into icy waters, the lanes of the sea;
he must follow the paths of exile: fate is inflexible.

Mindful of hardships, grievous slaughter,
the ruin of kinsmen, the wanderer said:
"Time and again at the day's dawning
I must mourn all my afflictions alone.

There is no one still living to whom I dare open
the doors of my heart. I have no doubt
that it is a noble habit for a man
to bind fast all his heart's feelings,
guard his thoughts, whatever he is thinking.
The weary in spirit cannot withstand fate,
a troubled mind finds no relief:

wherefore those eager for glory often
hold some ache imprisoned in their hearts.
Thus I had to bind my feelings in fetters,
often sad at heart, cut off from my country,
far from my kinsmen, after, long ago,
dark clouds of earth covered my gold-friend;
I left that place in wretchedness,
plowed the icy waves with winter in my heart;
in sadness I sought far and wide
for a treasure-giver, for a man

who would welcome me into his mead-hall,
give me good cheer (for I boasted no friends),
entertain me with delights. He who has experienced it
knows how cruel a comrade sorrow can be
to any man who has few loyal friends:
for him are the ways of exile, in no wise twisted gold;
for him is a frozen body, in no wise the fruits of the earth.
He remembers hall-retainers and treasure
and how, in his youth, his gold-friend
entertained him. Those joys have all vanished.

A man who lacks advice for a long while
from his loved lord understands this,
that when sorrow and sleep together
hold the wretched wanderer in their grip,
it seems that he clasps and kisses
his lord, and lays hands and head
upon his lord's knee as he had sometimes done
when he enjoyed the gift-throne in earlier days.

the sea-birds bathing, spreading their feathers,
frost and snow falling mingled with hail.

"Then his wounds lie more heavy in his heart,
aching for his lord. His sorrow is renewed;
the memory of kinsmen sweeps through his mind;
joyfully he welcomes them, eagerly scans
his comrade warriors. Then they swim away again.

Their drifting spirits do not bring many old songs
to his lips. Sorrow upon sorrow attend
the man who must send time and again
his weary heart over the frozen waves.

"And thus I cannot think why in the world
my mind does not darken when I brood on the fate
of brave warriors, how they have suddenly
had to leave the mead-hall, the bold followers.
So this world dwindles day by day,

and passes away; for a man will not be wise
before he has weathered his share of winters
in the world. A wise man must be patient,
neither too passionate nor too hasty of speech,
neither too irresolute nor too rash in battle;
not too anxious, too content, nor too grasping,
and never too eager to boast before he knows himself.

When he boasts a man must bide his time
until he has no doubt in his brave heart
that he has fully made up his mind.

A wise man must fathom how eerie it will be
when all the riches of the world stand waste,
as now in diverse places in this middle-earth
old walls stand, rugged at by winds
and hung with hoar-frost, buildings in decay.
The wine-halls crumble, lords lie dead,
deprived of joy, all the proud followers
have fallen by the wall: battle carried off some,
led them on journeys; the bird carried one
over the welling waters; one the gray wolf
devoured; a warrior with downcast face
hid one in an earth-cave.

Thus the Maker of Men laid this world waste
until the ancient works of the giants stood idle,
hushed without the hubbub of inhabitants.

Then he who has brooded over these noble ruins,
and who deeply ponders this dark life,
wise in his mind, often remembers
the many slaughters of the past and speaks these words:
Where has the horse gone? Where the man? Where the giver of gold?
....

darkened under the shadow of night as if it had never been.
Where the loved warriors were, there now strands a wall
of wondrous height, carved with serpent forms.

100 The savage ash-spears, avid for slaughter,
have claimed all the warriors—a glorious fate!

Storms crash against these rocky slopes,
sleet and snow fall and fetter the world,
winter howls, then darkness draws on,

105 the night-shadow casts gloom and brings
fierce hailstorms from the north to frighten men.

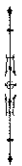
Nothing is ever easy in the kingdom of earth,
the world beneath the heavens is in the hands of fate.

110 Here possessions are fleeting, here friends are fleeting,
here man is fleeting, here kinsman is fleeting,
the whole world becomes a wilderness."

So spoke the wise man in his heart as he sat apart in thought.

Brave is the man who holds to his beliefs; nor shall he ever
show the sorrow in his heart before he knows how he

115 can hope to heal it. It is best for a man to seek
mercy and comfort from the Father in heaven, the safe home that awaits us all.



Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament

Old English literature focuses largely on masculine and military concerns and lacks a concept of romantic love—what the twelfth-century French would later call "*fine amour*." Against this backdrop *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* stand out, first, by their use of woman's voice and second, by their treatment of the sorrows of love.

Though the exact genre of these poems is problematic, some scholars classify them as riddles and others as religious allegories, most group them with a class of Old English poems known as elegies, with which they are preserved in the same manuscript, the Exeter Book. The elegies lament the loss of earthly goods, comradeship, and the "hall joys," often, as in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, by a speaker in exile. *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* differ from the other elegies in that the speakers, as women, had no experience of comradeship to lose, as their main function was to be exchanged in marriage to cement relationships between feuding tribes. They are in a sense twice exiled, first from the noble brotherhood by their gender, and second from their beloved by their personal history. Furthermore, unlike the speakers in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, they do not look forward to the consolation of a heavenly kingdom imagined as a warlord with his group of retainers.

Although the two elegies in woman's voice are unique in the Old English corpus, they have analogues within the larger tradition of continental woman's song, which flourished in medieval Latin and the vernaculars from the eleventh century on. Their composition was so early—990 at the latest—that this tradition could not have influenced them, although the Ro-

Marilyn Desmond has suggested, perhaps Virginia Woolf's speculation that "anonymous woman" is true of these poems.

Though scholars agree that *Wulf and Eadwacer* is "heartrending" and "haunting cannot agree on the dramatic situation—each translation is an act of interpretation. Tl sent translator, Kevin Crossley-Holland, sees the poem as involving the female speaker husband (Eadwacer); her lover (Wulf), from whom she is separated; and her child (a Although what transpired before is unclear, she wistfully concludes, "men easily savag was never secure, our song together." The dramatic setting of *The Wife's Lament* is si ambiguous; it is not clear whether the woman's anger is directed toward her husband third person who plotted to separate them.

Wulf and Eadwacer¹

Prey, it's as if my people have been handed prey.
They'll tear him to pieces if he comes with a troop.

O, we are apart.

Wulf is on one island, I on another,
a fastness that island, a fen-prison.

Fierce men roam there, on that island;
they'll tear him to pieces if he comes with a troop.

O, we are apart.

How I have grieved for my Wulf's wide wanderings.

10 When rain slapped the earth and I sat apart weeping,
when the bold warrior wrapped his arms about me,
I seethed with desire and yet with such hatred.

Wulf, my Wulf, my yearning for you
and your seldom coming have caused my sickness,

my mourning heart, not mere starvation.

Can you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf will spirit
our pitiful whelp to the woods.

Men easily savage what was never secure,
our song together.

The Wife's Lament¹

I draw these words from my deep sadness,
my sorrowful lot. I can say that,
since I grew up, I have not suffered
such hardships as now, old or new.

I am tortured by the anguish of exile.

First my lord forsook his family
for the tossing waves; I fretted at dawn
as to where in the world my lord might be.

In my sorrow I set out then,