The Cambridge Old English Reader

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Interpretations of *The Seafarer* have suffered much from its being pigeon-holed almost invariably with *The Wanderer* (Text 38), a near-neighbour in the anthology of secular and religious poetry known as the Exeter Book (see below), as an ‘elegy’. There is in fact little that is elegiac about it. Rather, it is an exhortatory and didactic poem, in which the miseries of winter seafaring are used as a metaphor for the challenge faced by the committed Christian, who perceives the spiritual emptiness of an easy life on ‘dry land’ and actively seeks to earn future heavenly bliss by embracing a rigorous exile from that life. This creates the crucial paradox of the poem, which is exposed in line 33: Seafaring is a wretched business – as the speaker has firmly persuaded us with his own ‘true story’ – and therefore (OE *forþon*) he must embrace it all the more. The more uncompromisingly realistic the opening account of seafaring, the more disturbing – and therefore effective – the paradox. This has been resisted by those readers of *The Seafarer* who have sought a smooth passage through the poem, yet the wilful desire of the seafarer to embrace the very hardship which he has just so graphically evoked is at its heart. At a literal level the message is harshly ascetic, but it is predicated unambiguously on hope and the (metaphorical) ‘seafarer’ will not therefore have regrets, though the allure of the life on land may still have its effects.

The theology underlying *The Seafarer* is unmistakably that of the most influential of all Christian writers, St Augustine of Hippo (*d.* 430), reflecting his concept of two ‘cities’ – the earthly city of fallen mankind, who are preoccupied with ephemeral human concerns, and the heavenly city of God, where an eternity of bliss awaits those exiles who have waited patiently for salvation, distancing themselves from ungodly distractions as they live the life of *peregrini* (‘pilgrims’), wanderers and exiles from the ancestral heavenly home (see Augustine’s *De ciuitate Dei*, ‘On the City of God’, bk. 15, ch. 1). Anglo-Saxon Christians will have been familiar with the pilgrim-hermits who put into literal practice the idea of *peregrinatio pro amore Dei*, ‘pilgrimage for the love of God’. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 891 records the journey of three Irish monks who had cast off from Ireland in a boat without oars and with provisions for only a week, ‘because for the love of God they wished to be on a pilgrimage, they cared not where’. The seafaring in *The Seafarer* is as real as we imagine it to be.
Thus in the first part of the poem the ‘seafarer’ sets up a contrast between himself, all too conscious of his spiritual needs, and complacent land-dwellers; even the delights of springtime in the earthly city only incite him to higher aspirations. A lyrical pivot between this and the second part of the poem is provided by lines 58–66, in which the mind escapes the confines of the body, has a glimpse of the future and returns greedy for it. With his oxymoron ‘this dead life’ in line 65, the poet encapsulates the hollowness of earthly existence and the second half of the poem becomes a homiletic development of the theme of the transitoriness of that existence. The conclusion is as logical as it is clear: Let us (good Christians, that is) remind ourselves where our true home lies and concentrate on getting there. If a comparison is to be made between The Wanderer and The Seafarer, it is better done in terms of contrast and complement, rather than congruence. In the course of the former poem, the poet steers his ‘wanderer’, who is in involuntary exile from human society, to a position of resigned acceptance of his earthly fate and preparedness to accept a new (Christian) perspective on life. The first-person poet of The Seafarer, on the other hand, has already accepted the consequences of the Christian position and goes further, voluntarily embracing hardship as a necessary step towards the promised salvation. Close parallels with the ideas of The Seafarer will be found in another OE poem, Resignation.

The Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501, fol. 8–130), in which The Seafarer is preserved, was compiled c. 975 somewhere in the south of England, and is one of the four major codices of OE poetry to have survived. It acquired its name because it has been in Exeter at least since it was donated to the cathedral library there by Bishop Leofric, some time before his death in 1072. The text of The Seafarer reached the Exeter Book in a defective state; there are apparent problems especially around lines 15–16, 23–6 and 112–15 (see notes below). Linguistic evidence for dating or place of composition is inconclusive. The consistent use of the prefix *bi-* rather than *be-* in *biegæt* (6), *bidroren* (16), etc, and *u* for *w* in *huilpan* (21), along with the ‘unsyncopated’ (i.e. uncontracted) verb-ending -eð/−að (as in *limpð*, 13, and *gewiðað*, 52: cf. *limpð*, 15a/7, and *gewið*, 4/14), have been taken as ‘early’ features but in fact they occur also in poetical texts known to be of tenth- or eleventh-century composition. The lack of syncopation has been identified also as an Anglian feature, along with forms such as *calde* (8; not *cealde*), *ælda* (77; not *ealda*) and *meotudes* (103; not *metod*, but cf. *meotod*, 108), but as dialectal indications these are all very weak.

**Further reading**

MÆG ic be mæ sylfum 'sōdgied' wrecan, Can about me myself relate sīpas secgan, hū ic 'geswincdagum' journeys (or experiences) tell earfoðhwile oft þroðwade, times of hardship ap suffered bitre brœostceare gebiden hæbbe, 'heart-care' as endured 5 gecunnad in cœole 'cearselda' fela, experienced 'keel' (i.e. ship) 'atol ýpa gewealc': Pær 'mec oft bigeat' nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan oppressive night-watch ship's prow þonne hē beo clifum 'cnossað'. 'Calde' geþrunen when along pinched wæron mine fēt, forste gebunden by frost fettered caldum clommum, pær þa ceare seofedun chains dp anxieties sighed 10 'hāt'ymb heortan. Hungor innan slāt around within rent merewērges mōd. Þæt se mon ne wāt of the sea-weary one mind as knows 'þe him on foldan fægrost limpe', land

1 sōdgied 'true story (or song)' (acc. sg.); cf. the start of The Wife's Lament (40/1). 2 geswincdagum dat. of time: 'in days of toil'. 5 cearselda 'dwellings of sorrow' (partitive gen. after fela, 'many'); an ironical metaphor, for seld is normally used of solid land-dwellings.

6 atol ýpa gewealc Parallel with cearselda fela as a further obj. of gecunnad: the terrible surging of the waves'. The phr. is partly repeated in 46 and also occurs in the OE Exodus (18/10). mec ... bigeat 'seized (or came upon) me' (mec is an alternative form of acc. me); the subj. is nearo nihtwaco in 7. Cf. a similar use of the vb. in 40/32.

8 cnossað 'beats' or 'dashes'. The switch to the pres. tense is presumably made because an habitual action is now being described; the vb. is intrans. (cf. the related trans. form used in 33). Calde dat. of instrument: 'by cold'; similarly forste (9) and caldum clommum (10).

11 hāt Either adj. 'hot' (nom. pl. fem.), describing ceare, or adv. 'hotly', modifying seofedun; in either case, the ending -e has been elided before the vowel of the following word. 'Hot', meaning here 'intense' or 'violent', makes a telling contrast with the external coldness of the seafarer’s situation.

13 þe him ... limpeð imper. vb. with dat. rflx. pron.: 'whom [lit. “who, for him”] it suits (or happens) most agreeably', or ‘for whom it goes most agreeably’.


hū ic earmcearinë īscealdne sē

winter wunade wraecan lāstum,

winemǣgum bidoren, kinsfolk bereft (of +d)

bihongen hrīmgicelum; hægl scūrum hung about with icicles in showers

flēg. flew

Þær ic ne gehýrde būtan hlimman sē;

trans. acc. ‘in the winter’. wraecn lāstum adv. clause: ‘in the paths of exile’ (wraecan is an n-noun, gen. sg.). It has been suggested that this formulaic half-line is a late accretion to the text and has pushed the succeeding phr. into a metrically incomplete line by itself (16).

ic ne gehýrde būtan ‘I did not hear (anything) except’, or ‘I heard nothing but’. hlimman sē acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3] after gehýrde: the sea resounding.’

curlews sound laughter of men mǣw. singende fore medodrince. seagull singing mead-drinking

Stormas þær stānclifu bēotan. ‘at times swan’s song wave hung about with icicles in showers’

lyfer ic ne gehýrde būtan hlimman sē; īscealdne wēg. Hwīlum ylfete song as At times swan’s

flēg. flew

fiær ic ne gehýrde būtan hlimman sē; hlimman sē acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3] after gehýrde: the sea resounding.’

hlimman sē acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3] after gehýrde: the sea resounding.’

BR. hlimman sē acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3] after gehýrde: the sea resounding.’

lyfer ic ne gehýrde būtan hlimman sē; īscealdne wēg. Hwīlum ylfete song as At times swan’s

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hlimman sē acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3] after gehýrde: the sea resounding.’

BR. hlimman sē acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3] after gehýrde: the sea resounding.’
hrîm hrûsan bond, hægl fêol on eorþan, corna caldast.

Forþon cnyṣað nû
heortan geþôtas’ þæt ic hêan strêamas,
sealtýpa gelâc, sylf cunnige.
Monað môdes lust ’mæla gehwylce’
ferð to fêran’ þæt ic feor heonan
’elþôdigra eard gesêce.
Forþon’ ’nis þaes môdwlone mon ofer eorþan’
ne his gifena’ þaes gôd ne in geogupe to þaes
hwæt ne in his dædum to þaes dêor’ ’ne him his dryhten to þaes hold’ brave
þæt hê ’â his sæfôre sorge næbbe’,
 ’tô hwon hine Dryhten gedôn wille’.
’Ne bíp him tô hearpan hyge’ ne to hringþege,
 ’ne tô wîfe wyn’ ne tô worulde hyht’, in woman
ne ymbe ówiht elles, nefne ymb ýda gewealc. for anything except
ne in geogupe to þaes nor of (or in) gifts generous

33–4 Forþon This very common word, with the basic sense of ‘for that (reason)’ or ‘for (the reason) that’, may operate as an adv. (‘therefore . . .’), as apparently in 27, or conj. (‘. . . because’). This allows for a certain amount of creative ambiguity in OE. A contrasting meaning, ‘yet’, is less easy to demonstrate. In this line, forþon (‘therefore’) launches the key paradox of the poem: the seafarer embraces the very hardship he has so graphically evoked. (A case might be made for the trans. ‘because’, with the sentence beginning monað then consequential, but that reduces the dynamic of the poem to a mere list of loosely connected ideas.) cnyṣað nû heortan geþôtas The probable subj. of the vb. is the phr. heortan geþôtas, with heortan as gen. sg. of an n-noun and the vb. intrans.: ‘the thoughts of my heart press (or urge) now (that . . .)’. Alternatively, heortan could be the acc. sg. obj. of cnyṣað taken as trans.: ‘(my) thoughts press (my) heart now (that . . .)’.

36 mæla gehwylce dat. of time: ‘time and again’ (lit. ‘in each of times’).
38 elþôdigra eard ‘the land of foreigners (or strangers)’. This may be an unspecified place of further pilgrimage or exile, or perhaps heaven (see Heb 11.13–16 and Augustine, De ciuitate Dei, bk. 15, ch. 1).
39 nis þaes . . . ofer eorþan Here, and in 40–1, þaes is used as an adv. (with additional tô in three cases) and is best translated ‘so’: ‘there is not anyone on earth so proud of heart’.
41 ne him . . . þaes hold ‘nor (a man) whose lord is so gracious to him’.
42 â his sæfôre sorge næbbe ‘never has anxiety about his sea-voyage [gen. of respect]’.
43 tô hwon . . . gedôn wille ‘(as) to what the Lord will bring him to’, or ‘as to how the Lord will treat him’.

Ne bíp him . . . hyge poss. dat.: ‘his thought is not’.
45 ne . . . wyn ‘nor (is his) joy . . .’ tô worulde hyht ‘in hope of the world’; i.e. trust in worldly things.
Example and Exhortation

Ac ā° hafað 'longunge’ sē þe on lagu° fundað°. ever sea sets out
Bearwas° 'blōstum nimað', byrig 'fægriāð, Groves
wongas witigad°, woruld ānnet∂. hurries onward
50 Ealle þā° gemonia∂ ‘mōdes fūsne
sefan’tō sīpe°, ‘þām þe’ swā penced∂, these (things) urge
on flōdwegas° feor 'gewītad°. journey intends
Swylce° 'gēac° monad 'gēomran reorde', Likewise cuckoo
singeð sumeres weard°, sorge bēode°
hurries onward
Ealle fl° āngemonia∂ modes fūsne
sefan’tō sīpe°, ‘þām þe’ swā penced∂,
on flōdwegas° feor ‘gewītad°.
55 'bitter’ in brēosthord°. Pæt se beorn° ne wāt,
ēstēadig° secg°, hwæt 'þā sume’ drēogað°
þe þā 'wraclāstas’ wīdost° lecgad°.
‘Forþon’ nū mīn hyge hweorfeð° ofer°
hrēþelocan°,
mīn mōdsefa° mid° mereflōde°
52
50–1 mōdes fūsne sefan Both sefan and fūsne are best taken as objs. of gemonia∂: ‘the (one) eager of spirit, his heart’. þām þe Here þām is a pron.: ‘in the one who’.
52 gewītad° The ending -e∂ would be more usual in the sg. Many editors emend to inf. gewītan, which is then the complement of penced∂ in 51.
53 gēac The cuckoo as a bird of lament with a sad voice appears also in the OE poem The Husband’s Message (23), and is a notable feature of early Celtic elegies. gēomran reorde dat. of manner: ‘with sad voice’.
55 bitter If the adj. describes sorge, ‘sorrow’, it is acc. sg. fem., with terminal e elided before the vowel of in. Alternatively, it may qualify weard (nom. sg. masc.), in which case its form is correct.
56 þā sume þā is probably the demons. pron. in apposition with pron. sume: ‘those ones’, i.e. ‘certain people’ or simply ‘some’.
57 wraclāstas The ‘paths of exile’ (acc. pl.) are a recurring motif in OE poetry; see The Wanderer (38/5 and 32).
58 Forþon Again the paradoxical ‘therefore’. The active mind of the seafarer anticipates the intended journey and returns with longing. The repetition of forþon in 64 may be best interpreted as correl., ‘because’, marking the start of the explanation of the paradox; but it might be argued to be a parallel ‘therefore’.

47 longunge Probably the ‘longing’ or ‘yearning’ is for the onward journey and the half-line is a restatement of the seafarer’s spiritual urge; but he might be making the point that, even though he turns his back on earthly pleasures, he is still human enough to have longings for them.
48–9 blōstum nima∂ Apparently, ‘take with blossoms’, i.e. ‘come into flower’, although there are no other examples in OE of niman construed thus with the dat. (and blōstman, acc. pl., may have been intended). fægri∂ ... witiga∂ If these vbs. are trans., the subj. of both is still bearwas, and the (acc.) objs. are byrig and wongas, respectively: ‘(they) make the cities lovely, adorn the meadows’. Alternatively, the vbs. may be taken as intrans. and the nouns as their (nom.) subjs.: ‘the cities become lovely, the meadows become beautiful’.
50–1 mōdes fūsne sefan Both sefan and fūsne are best taken as objs. of gemonia∂: ‘the (one) eager of spirit, his heart’. þām þe Here þām is a pron.: ‘in the one who’.
The Seafarer

eorpán sceatás, cymed eft tā mē
again
gīfre ond grēdig; gielleð ‘ānfloga’, avid cries
hwetēð on ‘wælweg’ hreþer unwearnunō incites heart as irresistibly
ofer holmā gelaguō. Forþon mē hātranō sind seas’ expanses more inspiring
65 Dryhtnes drēamas ḍonne ðis dēade lif, joys
lēneō on londe. ḍc gelỹfe nōō fleeting not
pæt ‘him’ eorðwelanō ḍece stōndeðō; earthly riches eternally remain
simleō ‘prēora sum þinga gehwylce’ always
ær his tidegō ‘tō twēon weorpeð’: final day
66 ‘ādilō oþpe yldō oþpe ecgheteō’ sickness old age sword-violence
‘fēgum fromweardum’ feorhō oþþringēðō. life as wrests
‘Forþon pæt bið eorla gehwām æftercwēpendra
lof līfgendra lāstworda betst,
pæt hē gewyrce; ær hē on weg ’scyle’,
67 ‘fremum’ on foldanō wiðō fēonda nīþō, earth against malice
dēorum dādum dēofle tōgēanesō, brave against +d
pæt hine ældaō bearnō æfter hergenō of men children np may praise sbj
ond his lōf sīþpanō līfgeō mid englum glory then may live sbj
68 eorpān sceatās A phr. parallel with hwēles ēpel: ‘(over) the regions (or surfaces) [acc. pl.] of the earth’.
69 ānfloga i.e. the cuckoo; almost certainly not the soul, as some critics have suggested.
70 wælweg Probably for hwælweg, ‘whale’s path’, i.e. the sea (cf. 60); w- for hw- occurs elsewhere in the Exeter Book. But conceivably wæl is the word meaning ‘slaughter’ or ‘the dead’.
71 him ‘for him’. There is no obvious antec. for the pron. here, nor for his in 69, but both clearly refer to ‘a man’, the land-living man of 71 who is subject to the trials of mortal life and fated to die (fēge and fromweard).
72 pëora sum ‘one of three (things)’. þinga gehwylce ‘in each of circumstances’, i.e. ‘invariably’.
73 tō twēon weorpeð ‘becomes (a matter) for doubt’.
74 ādil... yldo... ecghete These three earthly enemies are listed also by King Hrothgar in Beowulf, 1735–9, in a speech about kingship and destiny.
75 fēgum fromweardum ‘from (the man) fated to die (and) about to depart’ (fromweard, lit. ‘from-ward’, on the pattern of ‘to-ward’).
76 Forþon pæt bið... hē gewyrce The syntax is complex but the meaning is clear: ‘Therefore for each man (eorla gehwām) the best of reputations to leave behind (lāstworda [‘track-words’]) is the praise (lof) of those who will speak after his death (æftercwēpendra), the living (līfgendra), that he may bring about (gewyrce) . . .’. The pron. pæt in 72 is correl. with conj. pæt in 74, and both are better left out of the trans. The obj. of gewyrce is the clause beginning pæt hine in 77.
77 scyle A vb. of motion is needed: ‘must (go)’ [§G2d].
78 fremum dat. of instrument: ‘by good actions’; this is an emendation of the manuscript’s fremman, which is impossible to construe plausibly. The phr. dēorum dādum in 76 is parallel.
"āwa tō ealdre", ēcan līfes "blāðo", splendour
80 drēam” mid duge þum. ‘Dagas’ sind gewitene”, hosts Days departed
ealle onmēdlan° eorpan rices;
‘nearon’ nū cyningas ne cāseras° emperors
ne goldgiefan swylce° iū° wāron such as once
þonne hī ’mæst mid° him° mærpa° gefremedon° among themselves performed
ond on dryhtlicestum° dōme° līfdon. most noble renown
Gedroren° is þeos duguð° eal, drēamas sind gewitene, Perished company
wuniað° þā wācran° ond þās woruld healdab°, remain weaker (people) inhabit
‘brūcað þurh bisgo”. Blāed is gehnāged°, humbled
eorpan indryhto° ealdād° ond sēara° nobility ns ages withers
85 swā nū monna gehwylc° geond° middangeard°. throughout world
‘Yldo him on fareð”, onsyn° blācað°, face grows pale
gomelfeax° gnornað°, wāt his iūwine°, grey-haired (man) mourns past friends
æþelinga bearn, eorpan forgiefene°. committed (to +d)
Ne mæg ’him þonne se flæschoma’, þonne ’him’
þet feorg° losað° life fails
ne swēte° forswełgan° ne sār° gefēlán°, sweetness swallow pain as feel
ne hond onhrēran° ne mid hyge° þencan. move mind
‘Þēah þe gref willi golde strēgan
brōpor his geborenum? ‘byrgan be ḍeadum

79–80 āwa tō ealdre ‘always in eternity’, i.e. ‘for ever and ever’. blāðo, drēam These appear to be parallel with lof as subjs. of lifige, i.e. states which it is hoped will endure for ever. blāðo is for blāed, showing a confusion of δ and d common in late manuscripts.
80 Dagas sind gewitene… For an expression of the transience of the world similar to that expressed here (80–102), particularised in terms of the passing of the heroic way of life, see The Wanderer (38/92–6, etc). In 82, cf. the rhetorical question from the author of the tenth Vercelli Homily: ‘Where are the powerful emperors and kings that there once were?’ There are also classical parallels.
82 nearon ‘are not’ (ne + earon §§G1a.ii). The scribe wrote næron (‘were not’), which seems illogical; hence the emendation.
84 māst… mærpa ‘the greatest [acc.] of glorious deeds’.
88 brūcað þurh bisgo ‘(they) use (it) in toil’, or ‘occupy it with trouble’.
90 swā nū monna gehwylc ‘just as now each man (does)’.
91 Yldo him on fareð Here on is an adv. (and takes the alliterating stress): ‘For him old age marches onwards (or advances)’.
94 him… se flæschoma poss. dat.: ‘his body”; this is the subj. of the vbs. in 95–6. him poss. dat., referring either to the dying man or to his body.
97–8 Peāh þe… his geborenum The subj. is brōpor and the obj. gref: ‘Though a brother may wish to strew the grave with gold for his brother’ (geborenum: lit. ‘one born [in the same family]’). These lines carry an implicit censure of heathen burial practices (cf. Text 24) and express the Christian warning that material wealth will count for nothing on Judgement Day.
mämpnum mislicum þæt hine mid wille);

100 'ne mæg þære sæwle þe bıþ synna ful
gold tō gēoce’ for Godes egsan,
þonne ‘hē’ hit ær hýdeð þenden hē hēr
leofað. 

Micel bıþ se meotudes egsa ‘for þon hī sēo molde oncyrrēð’.
Sē gestaþelade stīpe grundas, He established firm foundations
ne mæg flære sāwele ðawle flæt hine mid wille, (even) when hides while
leofað. 

Dol sē þe him his Dryhten ne ondrǣdeþ: cymed Foolish fears
him se dēað unþinged. to him unexpected

98–9 byrgan . . . mislicum The infin. is still governed by wille and deădum (adj. as noun) may be sg. or pl.; either ‘to bury (it [gold]) beside the dead (man), along with various treasures’, or ‘to bury him [the brother] among the dead, with various treasures’. þæt hine mid wille ‘that he may wish (to go) with him’ (mid may take acc. as well as dat.).

100–1 ne mæg þære sæwle . . . tō gēoce The vb. ‘be’ is required for the modal [§G2d]: ‘cannot (be) of (any) help to the soul’.

102 hē i.e. the dead man.

103 for þon hī . . . oncyrrēð Here þon is best taken as an instr. pron., with antec. egsa, and hī as a rřlfx. pron. (acc. sg. fem.) with antec. sēo molde: ‘before which the earth turns itself away’. Cf. Rev 20.11.

106 Dol . . . ondrǣdeþ This line occurs in almost the same form in the OE poem Maxims I, 35. Rľff. him is best not trans.

109 þæt on staþelum healdan ‘keep it on firm foundations’; i.e. under control.

110 gewis wērum ‘true to (his) pledges’; but, conceivably, the noun here is wer ‘man’ and the meaning ‘reliable among men’. wīsum dat. of respect: ‘in (his) ways’.

111 mid gemete The wisdom of acting with moderation is emphasised also in The Wanderer (38/65–72).

112 wiþ lēofne . . . bealo This and the next three lines are clearly incomplete. As it stands, the meaning of this one seems to be ‘(govern with moderation) malice against friend and against foe’. One speculative restoration adds lufan at the beginning: ‘love towards friend, malice (bealo) towards foe’.
Example and Exhortation

‘þéah þe hē hine wille þyres fulne
opþe on bǣlæ forbærmedne

115 his geworhtne wine’. Wyrd° bǐþ swĩðþre°, meotud meahtigra° þonne ãŋges° monnes gehygd°. mightier any conception
Uton° wē hycgan° hwær wē hām ãgen°. Let us consider any conception
ond þonne gependæn° hū wē þider° cumen°. think there may come
ond wē þonne ãc tilien° ‘þæt wē tō mōtæn’ strive sbj

120 in þā ãcæn ãdignesse°, blessedness
þær is līf gelong° in° lufan Dryhtnes, dependent on
hyht° in heofonum. Pæs° sỹ° þām halgan° hope For that be holy one
þone°
þæt hē ãsic° geweorþade°, wuldres ealdor°, us (has) honoured prince
ēce Dryhten, in° ealle ðīd°. through time

125 Åmen.

113–15 þéah þe . . . wine If we assume that the antec. of hine is lāþne (112), a possible interpretation is: ‘though he may wish him [his foe] full of fire and the friend he has made (geworhtne) consumed on the funeral-pyre (bǣlæ’). A contrast is then being made between the fires of hell for the foe and a proper cremation for the friend.
119 þæt wē tō mōtæn adv. tō (‘thither’), belonging to an unexpressed vb. of motion: ‘that we may (arrive) there’.
The *Durham Proverbs* are so called because they are found in a manuscript now in the library of Durham Cathedral. In one of the curious juxtapositions which characterise the preservation of OE literature, they were copied, by a none too skilful scribe, onto five blank pages between a collection of hymns and a series of liturgical canticles. These hymns and canticles are in Latin, but with an OE gloss, and they seem to have been copied out in the second quarter of the eleventh century, with the proverbs being added a little later. The manuscript was made at Canterbury, and a second part contains a copy of Ælfric’s grammatical work, his *Excerptiones* (see p. 22). Two of the proverbs (nos. 37 and 39) appear also as additions to a mid-eleventh-century Latin psalter (London, British Library, Royal 2. B. v) and two (nos. 14 and 42) are included in the thirteenth-century Middle English collection of the *Proverbs of Hendyng*. There is one other major set of proverbs in OE (surviving in three manuscripts), a version of the *Disticha Catonis* (the ‘Dicts of Cato’), a third-century collection of wise sayings in Latin which enjoyed great popularity throughout the Middle Ages; it was widely used as a class-text in the monastic schools of Anglo-Saxon England. The only connection between these and the *Durham Proverbs* is the occurrence of the first of the latter as part of dict no. 23 (see 1n, below).

The forty-six OE proverbs in the Durham collection are all accompanied by Latin versions, but these derive from no known source. It is indeed not certain that the Latin versions came first and scholars have been tempted to see the collection as an original vernacular work, a native English collection of proverbs which someone then tried to put into Latin. The uneven and in places incomprehensible nature of the latter might suggest that it was supplied by a novice monk attempting the translation as a learning exercise. However, comprehension problems occur in the OE versions of the *Durham Proverbs*, too, and there are several cases (such as no. 16) where we have to turn to the Latin to make sense of the OE. The relationship between the English and Latin versions thus remains unclear. (The Latin versions given for the two proverbs occurring in Royal 2. B. v are identical with those in the Durham manuscript.)

A ‘proverb’ – at least as represented in the Durham collection – has a special quality of transferability which a ‘maxim’ in general does not. Thus the statement that ‘a man can’t have a mouthful of meal and also blow the fire’ (see no. 43)
certainly has a simple practical truth in it, but the man’s dilemma is also paradigmatic: it stands for any situation where it is impossible to do two things at once. The Durham Proverbs offer a compelling mixture of the familiar and the bizarre. The cheerful observation of everyday affairs allows, and probably demands, the incursion of humour, something which the more serious and cerebral maxims have little scope for, and one example borders on the surreal (no. 11). Some of the proverbs are hoary old favourites from antiquity, but others are unknown in Latin or any other literatures. Several are echoed in the proverbial statements made in many OE poems, and a few have fairly close Old Norse parallels, though this need not suggest any direct connection. Some of the proverbs in the Durham collection remain tantalisingly obscure, perhaps through textual corruption, though only one all but defies rational interpretation (no. 15).

No overall structural coherence is apparent in the collection, but there is a cluster of four proverbs on the theme of ‘a friend’, nos. 2–5 (with another at no. 26), and in a few cases, pairs of proverbs seem to be deliberately juxtaposed, such as nos. 8 and 9, and 24 and 25. Several distinct styles may be seen. The plain aphoristic statement with sceal (‘must’, with all its ambiguities: see p. 296) occurs in five proverbs. The gnomic biþ is used in eleven, and the formula sē pe, ‘he who’, occurs twelve times, along with two similar cases where the relative pronoun is omitted. Of especial note are five cwæþ proverbs (nos. 10, 11, 15, 44 and 45), which we are surely entitled to call jokes. Their structure is bipartite, with a comparatively unremarkable initial statement rendered ludicrous by a second, which reveals the unexpected identity of the first speaker. Half of the proverbs use alliteration for effect and in some cases this results in complete metrical lines (see especially nos. 17, 19, 27, 35, 40 and 42). The language of the proverbs is late WS with a few non-WS spellings, such as fele (no. 26), gehere (no. 39) and gelpeð (no. 46); these cannot be shown to be local to Kent, despite the apparent origin of the Durham manuscript in Canterbury (as noted above). Eight emendations have been made below (see p. 353), the most important being signalled in the notes. In the glosses and in the main Glossary, reference is made to proverb-number, not line-number; there is, however, no numbering in the manuscript.

Further reading

O. Arngart, The Durham Proverbs, Lunds Universitets Årsskrift 1.52.2 (Lund, 1956)  
R. S. Cox, ‘The Old English Dicts of Cato’, Anglia 90 (1972), 1–42  
N. F. Barley, ‘A Structural Approach to the Proverb and Maxim with Special Reference to the Anglo-Saxon Corpus’, Proverbiun 20 (1972), 737–50  
G. Schleich, ‘Die Sprichwörter Hendings und die Prouerbs of Wysdom’, Anglia 51 (1927), 220–77
Reflection and Lament


[5] Beforan his frœonde †biddeþº, sëº þe his wædleº mæneþº.


[8] Hwîlumº æfter medoº †menn mæst geþyrsteðº.

1 Patience 2 is useful far and nearer more useful 3 (time of) need 4 Does not have [ne hafað] many +g 5 he poverty laments 6 year raven gives 7 dirty bag lie 8 Sometimes mead as

1 middes ëades gen. of definition: ‘of half of happiness’, i.e. ‘halfway to happiness’. This proverb forms the second half of an item in the OE *Disticha Catonis*, no. 23 (see headnote), and this has prompted emendation of the Durham manuscript’s ëa to ëades. The first part of the dict is Forbaer oft ðet þu ëæde wrecan meæge, ‘suffer often what you might readily avenge’.

3 sceal freonda cunnian Either ‘must needs put (his) friends to the test’, or, taking sceal as the fut. auxil., ‘shall find out (his) friends’. Cunnian takes a noun in the gen.

5 biddeþ ‘entreats’ or ‘will entreat’. The Latin version has the subj. vb. postulet, and OE subj. bidde (‘let him beg . . .’) would better suit the context.

6 Gœd gœr . . . gyfeðº Cf. ‘Pigs might fly’.

7 searowa The noun searo has primary meanings of ‘art’, ‘cunning’ or ‘craft’, extended to that which is made skilfully or cunningly (including ‘war-gear’), so a general sense of ‘things of value’ or ‘treasure’ may be intended; this would correlate with the Latin version’s aurum, ‘gold’. However, this meaning of the noun is not attested elsewhere and the more abstract treasure of ‘cunning’, issuing from an otherwise unprepossessing person, is a perfectly viable idea. The form searowa is unusual for nom. pl. [§B2g]. An Old Norse analogue has wisdom coming from a shrivelled leather bag, i.e. an old man. Whatever the case, the message is simple: Don’t judge by appearances.

8 menn . . . geþyrsteðº The construction is impers.: lit. ‘it thirsts most to a person [dat. sg.]’, i.e. ‘a person thirsts most’. ‘Man’ might have been chosen as the more specific trans. here, for mead-drinking (with its ironical consequences) does seem to have been a male occupation in Anglo-Saxon England.
Æfter leofan menn langað swīðost.

Nū hit ys ‘on swīnes dōme’, cwæð ‘se ceorl sæt’ on eoferes hricge°.

‘Ne swā þēah trēowde þēah þū teala ëode’, cwæþ sē þe geseah hægtessan° ‘æfter hēafde geongan’.

‘Eall on mūde þæt on mōde’.

‘Gemēne sceal’māga° feoh°.

Man ðēþ° swā hē byþ ‘þonne hē mōt swā hē wile’.

10 boar’s back 11 saw witch 13 of kinspeople wealth 14 will do

9 Æfter . . . swīðost The syntactical parallels between this and no. 8 suggest that the two were deliberately juxtaposed, but there are differences. The impers. vb. langian usually takes its obj. in the acc. (though dat. is also possible, as with gebyrstæd), in which case menn may be acc. pl.: ‘people long most strongly’; then leofan is a noun: ‘for the beloved’. But the first three words may be taken together as a prep. phr., ‘for the beloved person’ (æfter plus dat. sg. menn, with the apparently weak inflection of the adj., -an, standing for strong -um); the two-word shorter phr. at the end then means simply, ‘one longs most strongly’ – a sentiment which has a strong echo in Beowulf, 1879–80. The Latin version supports the second interpretation of the first three words (using hominem, ‘man’), but the vb. used is tedet with the meaning ‘it becomes most tedious (or wearying)’. That is a possible meaning for the OE vb. langað, but the whole proverb then becomes less clear. The Latin could in fact be seen as a bungled attempt to render the OE; post does not accurately reflect OE æfter when it has objective sense, rather than temporal or local.

10 on swīnes dōme ‘in the judgement of the pig’; perhaps, ‘up to the pig’. se ceorl sæt ‘the man who sat’. This proverb is as enigmatic as it is memorable. The ceorl astride the boar’s back might simply be a ‘peasant’ or ‘yeoman’ but is more likely a ‘husband’ (as in the Latin: maritus). Presumably the swīn (often a domesticated pig) and the eofor (usually a wild boar) are the same creature; see the analogy in Beowulf (31a/49–50). Some joke about the perils of marriage is probably intended. Among the many grotesque little thirteenth-century stone carvings which are to be seen high up in the nave and in the chapter house of York Minster in England are two which depict a man precariously astride a pig.

11 Ne . . . ëode If, like ëode, trēowde be taken as sbj., the interpretation seems to be: ‘I would not trust (you) anyway (swā þēah), even though you walked properly’. æfter hēafde geongan Presumably the prep. has the sense ‘by means of’; thus, ‘go (or pass by) on (her) head’: geongan is emended from geo . . .

12 Eall . . . mōde ‘Everything is in the mouth that is in the mind (or heart)’, i.e. ‘What the heart thinks, the mouth speaks’. There is a ME version: ‘That the hert thynkyt the movte spekyt’, and Lk 6.45 provides a biblical analogue: ‘. . . for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh’.

13 Gemēne sceal ‘must (be) shared [lit. “in common”]’. Families ought to look after their own.

14 þonne hē mōt swā hē wile ‘when he may (do) as he wishes’. A man will reveal his true character when free from constraints. Cf. Proverbs of Hendyng: ‘Wan man mai done als [= as] he wille, þan doth he also [= as] he is’.
15 ‘Ne saga sagan, cwæð sē gesēah hwerne hēalaena sēoþan’.

16 Eāde wēs man mæg witan spell and ēac secgan.

17 Blind byþ bām ēagum, sē þe brēostum ne starat’.

18 ‘Dā ne sacað þe ætsamne ne bēoð.

19 ‘Ne dēah eall sōp āsǣð ne eall sār ætwiten’.

20 ‘Gyf þū well’ sprece, wyræðm after swā.

21 ‘Sōþ hit sylf acyþþeð’.

22 Earð ‘mæg þæt ān þæt hē ‘him’ ondrēde’.

23 ‘Ne sceal man’tō ār forht ne tō ār fægen’.

16 Easily understand narrative 18 Those quarrel together 20 speak do afterwards so 21 Truth reveals 22 Coward is afraid 23 soon fearful joyful

15 Ne saga… sēoþan This is the most obscure of the proverbs, no doubt owing to transmission error. The best that we can do with the OE as it stands is to accept saga as imper. of secgan, and sagan as acc. pl. of masc. n-noun saga, ‘narrative’ or ‘tale’. In the second part of the proverb, hēala (here gen. pl.) is a ‘hydrocele’, a tumour filled with fluid – or so the Latin equivalent (ponderosum) seems to tell us. Thus we have: ‘Tell no tales, said he who saw the pot full of hydroceles boil’. But what might it mean? One critic suggests, ‘What you attempt to persuade us to is not good for us’, but that seems a bit far-fetched. The Latin version has a vb. in the opening part with no equivalent in the OE and appears to say, ‘He doesn’t make good flesh with flesh (caro carnem), said he who boiled a pot full of hydroceles’. So far, we must accept defeat on this one.

16 wēs Although wēs is not in the manuscript, the Latin version indicates that it ought to be, and certainly it gives purpose to an otherwise rather empty idea: a wise man may easily understand a discourse or story and also explain it or pronounce on it.

17 bām ēagum ‘in both eyes’. sē þe brēostum ne starat (with starat for starād, and brēostum used with sg. meaning [§D4i]). Perhaps ‘he who does not see with (his own) heart’, but ‘into his own heart’ has also been suggested. In either case, we are near to a sense of ‘he who does not understand his own heart or mind’. Cf. ‘There are none so blind as those who will not see’, though this rather implies a conscious refusal to see truth.

18 Dā ne sacað… bēoð Cf. ‘It takes two to make a quarrel’.

19 Ne dēah eall sōp āsǣð ‘It does no good (for) all truth (to be) told’. ne eall sār ætwiten ‘nor all wrong imputed’, i.e. blamed on someone. Cf. ‘You can tell too much of the truth’.

20 Gyf þū… swā Cf. ‘Practice what you preach’.

21 Sōþ… acyþþeð Cf. ‘Truth will out’, or the biblical ‘Great is truth, and it prevails’ (3 Esd 4.41).

22 mag þæt ān ‘can (do only) the one (thing)’. him The refl. dat. pron. can be ignored in trans.

23 Ne sceal… fægen The vb. ‘be’ must be supplied [§G2d]. There is striking correspondence with The Wanderer (38/65–8): Wita… ne sceal nō to hátheort… ne to forht ne tō fægen, but calls for moderation are a commonplace of wisdom literature; the OE Disticha Catonis include several.
Forworht mann\textsuperscript{a} fri\textsuperscript{e}es\textsuperscript{b} behöfa\textsuperscript{c}.

Sëlre\textsuperscript{d} byþ þæt man hund heona gesēce þonne man hund hýnþa\textsuperscript{e} geþolie\textsuperscript{e}.

Ne byð þæt fele\textsuperscript{f} frōend, sē þe "ôþrum facn hêlêô".

Swâ cystigran hîwan\textsuperscript{g}, swå cynnigran\textsuperscript{h} gystas\textsuperscript{g}.

Gyfena\textsuperscript{i} gehwilc\textsuperscript{i} "underbæc besihþ".

Ne byþ æt fele\textsuperscript{j} frōend, sē æt man hund heona gesēce æt ononne man hund hîynþa byþ hwaet\textsuperscript{l}.

Swâc ystigran hîwan\textsuperscript{m}, s\textsuperscript{n}wâc ynnigran gystas\textsuperscript{m}.

Gyfena\textsuperscript{o} gehwilc\textsuperscript{o} "underbæc besihþ".

Ne wât\textsuperscript{p} swêtes\textsuperscript{q} ðanc\textsuperscript{q}, sē þe biteres ne onbyrge\textsuperscript{r}.

Tô nâwihte ne hopaô, seô tô hâme ne "higeô".

Eall here\textsuperscript{s} byþ hwæt\textsuperscript{t} þonne se lâtêow\textsuperscript{u} byþ hwæt\textsuperscript{t}.

Wîde timbreô, sē þe wegerendum hûreô".

Tiligera hûs\textsuperscript{v} lencgest\textsuperscript{v} standâp.

\textsuperscript{a} refuge has need of +\textsuperscript{g}  
\textsuperscript{b} Better oppressions endure  
\textsuperscript{c} faithful  
\textsuperscript{d} household guests  
\textsuperscript{e} Gift(s) each +\textsuperscript{gp}  
\textsuperscript{f} knows of sweetness pleasure as tastes +\textsuperscript{g}  
\textsuperscript{g} who

24 Forworht mann ‘A condemned person’ or ‘outlaw’. In the Anglo-Saxon lawcodes, friþ, ‘refuge’ or ‘sanctuary’, may also indicate the restoration of rights to an outlaw.

25 Sëlre . . . geþolie If heona is the gen. of the pl. noun hiwan, and if this is given its common meaning ‘members of a religious household’, then the proverb may allude to the refuge afforded by monasteries (but perhaps with an ironical suggestion that in normal circumstances monks are the last people one would wish to be with?): ‘It is better to seek out a hundred (hund) monks than to endure a hundred oppressions’. The juxtaposition with no. 24 seems deliberate. See also no. 27, where hiwan is again used, though not in an alliterating environment.

26 ôþrum facn hêlêô ‘hides (or harbours) treachery against another’.

27 Swâ cystigran . . . swâ cynnigran Here swâ is used as an adv. with the comp. adj.: ‘The better . . . the nobler’.

28 underbæc besihþ ‘looks back’. Gifts are always given in the expectation of a return. Cf. the Old Norse proverb, Ey sér til gildis gifo, ‘a gift always looks for a return’ (Hávamál, 1145).

29 Ne wât . . . onbyrge Cf. Alfred’s version of Boethius’s De consolatione Philosophiae (ch. 23; see p. 38 for edition): aelcum men pîncðhuniges biobrêad þy weorodra gif hê hwæne ær biteres onbirigð, ‘to every man the honeycomb seems the sweeter if he previously tastes something bitter’.

30 Tô nâwihte ne hopaô ‘he hopes for nothing’, i.e. ‘he has no hope’. higeô ‘sets his mind on’, ‘hopes for’ and ‘remembers’ are all possibilities here. Cf. ‘There’s no place like home’. It seems unnecessary to identify, as one editor has, a Christian dimension.

31 Eall here . . . hwæt Cf. the similar sentiment about leadership expressed proverbially in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 1003 (8/79–80).

32 Wide timbreô . . . hûreô It is not clear whether the second vb. is from hûran, ‘obey’ or ‘serve’ (with dat.), or hûrian, ‘hire’. The meaning seems to be, ‘He builds widely (or spaciously?) who serves (or hires out to) wayfarers (or travellers)’. Perhaps some comment on the unpredictability and/or unreliability of travellers is intended. For wide, the Latin version has crebro, ‘repeatedly’ or ‘often’, but the rest is senseless.

33 Tiligera hûs The noun tiligea (gen. pl.), from the vb. tilian, ‘labour’ or ‘exert oneself’, should perhaps be interpreted here as ‘those who labour’, rather than simply ‘labourers’; hûs is pl.: ‘the houses of those who labour’. Cf. ‘Hard work brings prosperity’. 
34 Mete gæþ on banan hand.

35 Lēana forlēosaþ, sē 'þe hit lýþran dēð'.

36 'Sēo nýþpearþ feala lāreðþ'.

37 'Betere byþ' oft feðre ðonne oferfeðreþ.

38 'Craefta gehwilc' byþ 'cealde' forgoldenþ.

39 'Ciggendra gehwilc' wileþ þæt hine man gehêreþ.

40 'Weard seteð, sē þe waeccedum wereð'.

41 'Ne sceall sē for horse murnan, sē þe wile heortþ ofærnanþ'.

42 'Swā fulre fæt swā hit mann sceal fægror beranþ'.

43 'Ne mæg man mūþ fulneþ melewes habban and ēac fýr blāwanþ'.

Gifts ap loses necessity much teaches loaded than overloaded repaid
39 wants listens to +a 41 be anxious stag overtake 42 more gently carry 43 full of meal blow

34 Mete . . . hand Apparently a statement about the positive consequences of (perhaps the justification for?) killing: ‘Food comes to the slayer’s hand’. Whether the killing referred to is of enemies or simply food-animals is not clear. It has been suggested that banan ought to be emended to benan ‘supplicant’, producing a proverb with the sense of ‘ask and ye shall receive’. The Latin version uses a noun meaning ‘dispenser’, which has led to the further suggestion that OE brytta was meant.

35 þe hit lýþran dēð The sg. pron. has the pl. antec. leana; the adj. lýþran is used as a noun: ‘who bestows them on a base [i.e. unworthy] person’.

36 Sēo nýþpearþ . . . lāreð Cf. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’.

37 Betere byþ ‘It is better to be . . .’. This proverb occurs also in a later manuscript (see headnote), with the first word replaced by sēlre (with the same meaning). Cf. ‘little by little’.

38 Craefta gehwilc Here craeft, often meaning ‘skill’ or ‘strength’, must have a more negative sense: ‘Every deceit (or trick). cealde lit. ‘coldly’ or ‘with coldness’; the Latin has acerbior, ‘more bitterly’ or ‘more harshly’.

39 Ciggendra gehwilc The noun is formed from the pres. part. of ciegan, ‘call out’ or ‘shout’: ‘Everyone who shouts’. The version in a later manuscript (see headnote) has a rather different emphasis: clipiendra gehwylc wolde þæt him man oncwéðe, ‘everyone who calls out would like someone to answer him’.

40 Weard . . . wereð In the manuscript, the OE version begins eard seeð and the emendation to weard seteð is made on the strength of Latin custodem ponit, but thereafter the Latin is not much help (qui uitiglans minat). The (emended) OE version could mean, ‘He sets a watchman, who guards against (or defends, wereð) the watchers’. This brings to mind (and perhaps answers) the question famously asked by Juvenal in the context of setting guards to keep a wife from lovers: sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?, ‘but who is to guard the guards themselves?’.

41 Ne sceall . . . ofærnan Cf. ‘Needs must’.

42 Swā fulre fæt swā ‘The fuller the cup, the . . .’. Cf. Proverbs of Hendyng: ‘When þe coppe is follest, þenne ber hire feyrest’.

43 Ne mæg . . . blāwan Cf. ‘No man can both sup and blow at once’ and ‘A man cannot whistle and drink at the same time’. There are close parallels in other Germanic languages, including one in Old High German more or less contemporary with the OE.
34. The ‘Durham Proverbs’

44. ‘Wide’ ne bǐp wel, cwæþ sē þe ‘gehyrde on helle hrīman’.
45. ‘Āge þē, sē þe æfter ēige’, cwæþ sē þe gesēah hungor of tūne faran°.
46. ‘Hwon° gelpeð°, sē þe wide sīpað°.

45 go 46 Little boasts travels

44. **wide** adv. ‘widely’, ‘far and wide’ or ‘afar’; perhaps an understatement for ‘everywhere’. **gehyrde** . . . **hrīman** A var. on the acc. and infin. construction [§G6d.i.3], with no obj. expressed: ‘heard (people) wailing’, or, treating the pres. part. as a noun: ‘heard the wailing’. The whole proverb might be rendered: ‘Far and wide things aren’t well [or, with more irony, ‘Things are far from well’], said he who heard the wailing in hell’. In the OE poem *Christ and Satan*, hell is described as ‘that miserable hall, where wailing and weeping are heard afar (wide)’ (331–2), in contrast with heaven, where ‘holy rejoicing’ is to be heard (327), and a few lines later we read: ‘Therefore he who was twelve miles away from hell could hear that there was a loud and sad gnashing of teeth’.

45. **Āge þē** subj. vb.: ‘he may have you’, or ‘let him have you’. **sē þe æfter ēige** ‘he who calls (you) back’.

46. **Hwon** . . . **sīpað** The taciturnity of the experienced wayfarer (who has seen much to talk about) is implicitly praised here; cf. the promotion of the same virtue in *The Wanderer* (38/11–14 and 111). There are several medieval analogues in other languages.
Reference Grammar of Old English

For readers unfamiliar with grammatical terminology, a Guide to Terms is given on pp. 504–12. The ‘cases’ (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative and instrumental) relevant to pronouns, nouns and adjectives are explained in §D. Where appropriate, specific grammatical usage is illustrated by quotation from, or reference to, the texts of the main Reader, cited by text-number and line-number (e.g. 12/33). Where alternative inflections are given in the paradigms, the first form will usually be the one occurring more commonly. Paradigms are for reference, but beginners in Old English are heartily encouraged to learn at least the first one (§A1a) by heart. This gives the forms of the word for ‘the’ (or ‘that/those’), some of which will not be immediately recognisable but which are often the key to the understanding of a sentence. For nouns, familiarity with the general paradigms given for each gender [§§B1a, B2a/b and B3a/b] is recommended; the minor variations [§§B1b–h, B2c–i and B3c–h] can be noted as and when necessary.

§A PRONOUNS

§A1 Demonstrative Pronouns

(a) se, þæt, sêo ‘the’, ‘that’, ‘those’

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Variations. 1. sêo frequently occurs as sîo in early texts (6/14, 19, etc).
2. se and sêo occasionally appear as þe and þêo, respectively, in late manuscripts: þe gebêorscipe (27/60).
3. þãm replaces þæm in later WS texts, and þæne replaces þone.

Uses

(i) As the definite article ‘the’: e.g. se mōna ‘the moon’. 355