

DEOR

Deor is rare among Old English poems in that it is written in stanzas and includes a refrain. It has been interpreted in many ways—among them a dramatic monologue, a charm for good fortune, a begging poem, an elegy, and a poem of consolation (Muir, 597–98). It follows a series of homiletic or religious poems and precedes two elegies and the first group of riddles; it is a poem that bridges the homiletic and the enigmatic. Both the form of the poem and its murky historical details are much debated. *Deor* weaves stories out of Germanic history and legend and shapes a moral reflection from them. Each stanza details a particular story of misfortune and suffering, ending with a refrain intended to generalize sorrow to hold some hope for its passing away with time. The refrain, *Þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg*, “That passed over—so can this,” appears to offer some hope for the surcease of the narrator’s suffering. The central paradox here is that while misfortunes may “pass over” in time, they remain in the mind of the singer in fragmented form. Ironically, the poem conveys a deep sense of loss even as it claims to ameliorate it.

The poem opens with the story of the legendary smith Weland, whose hamstrings are cut by King Nithhad in order to enslave him and force him to make beautiful objects for him. Weland seduces or rapes the king’s daughter Beadohild, leaving her pregnant, and kills the king’s sons. In the second stanza, Beadohild says that the death of her brothers was less painful to her than her own suffering, once she discovered that she was pregnant. In the third stanza, the story of Mæthhild and Geat is cryptically mentioned. There is much critical debate about this story, which has no known medieval origin. In the fourth stanza, *Deor* mentions a despotic ruler, Theodric, who

ruled the Mærings for thirty winters (years were often marked by winters in Anglo-Saxon England). In the fifth stanza, Deor mentions the tyrant Eormanric, a fourth-century king of the Goths. His “wolfish ways” lead to such suffering that his subjects hope that some foe might attack him and take over his kingdom.

After his cryptic catalogue of the misfortunes of legendary people in the first half of the poem, the narrator tells us that his name is Deor and that he once served as the *scop* or singer in the court of the Heodenings until he was unceremoniously displaced by another singer, Heorrenda. Heorrenda is mentioned in one of the sagas, but there is no record of a singer named Deor. His name may be a poetic fiction. *Deor* can mean “brave, bold” but also “grievous, ferocious.” As a noun it means “wild beast.” A similar word, *deore*, means “dear, precious, beloved,” and a wordplay seems possible here, as Deor moves from a beloved place in the Heodenings’ court to a life of loneliness and wild exile, “apart from joy.” Deor’s loss is finally twofold. He misses the life he once had as a prized singer in the court, but beyond that he can no longer remember the details of his old life or the stories he once sang. He can only recall these fragments. For all his hope in their passing over, they remain like barbs in the mind.

Deor

Weland the smith made a trial of exile.
 The strong-minded man suffered hardship
 All winter long—his only companions
 Were cold and sorrow. He longed to escape
 The bonds of Nithhad who slit his hamstrings, 5
 Tied him down with severed sinews,
 Making a slave of this better man.
That passed over—so can this.

To Beadohild the death of her brothers
 Was not so sad as her own suffering 10
 When the princess saw she was pregnant.
 She tried not to think how it all happened.
That passed over—so can this.

Many have heard of the cares of Mæthhild—
 She and Geat shared a bottomless love. 15

Her sad passion deprived her of sleep.

That passed over—so can this.

Theodric ruled for thirty winters

The city of the Mærings—that's known to many.

That passed over—so can this.

20

We all know the wolfish ways of Eormanric—

That grim king ruled the land of the Goths.

Many a man sat bound in sorrow,

Twisted in the turns of expected woe,

Hoping a foe might free his kingdom.

That passed over—so can this.

25

A man sits alone in the clutch of sorrow,

Separated from joy, thinking to himself

That his share of suffering is endless.

The man knows that all through middle-earth,

Wise God goes, handing out fortunes,

Giving grace to many—power, prosperity,

Wisdom, wealth—but to some a share of woe.

30

Let me tell this story about myself:

I was singer and shaper for the Heodenings,

Dear to my lord. My name was Deor.

For many years I was harper in the hall,

Honored by the king, until Heorrenda now,

A song-skilled shaper, has taken my place,

Reaping the rewards, the titled lands,

That the guardian of men once gave me.

That passed over—so can this.

35

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