

6 Introducing Old English Poetry

About 30,000 lines of Old English poetry survive, mostly in four manuscripts copied during the late tenth or early eleventh centuries. These are:

- the Exeter Book, a collection of religious and secular poetry donated to Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric in 1072;
- the Vercelli Book, a collection of religious poetry and prose probably taken to Vercelli in Italy during the eleventh century by pilgrims on their way to Rome;
- the Junius Manuscript, an illustrated collection of four long religious poems bequeathed to the Bodleian Library in Oxford by an early owner, Francis Junius;
- the *Beowulf* Manuscript, a collection of poetry and prose concerning marvels, once owned by Sir Robert Cotton and now in the British Library in London.

A smaller amount of poetry survives in other sources, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, whose annals are mainly in prose but occasionally in poetry. Since all Old English poetry is written in continuous long lines like prose, and may be copied alongside prose as in the *Chronicle*, the Vercelli Book, and the *Beowulf* Manuscript, it is only the form and style that identifies it as verse. The aim of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the main characteristics of Old English poetry, with examples from different genres. The following chapter will focus on the epic poem *Beowulf*; and an extract from *Beowulf*, together with two other complete poems, will be found in Part II.

From this point onwards, we shall no longer be simplifying the language and spelling of the texts, as in Chapters 2–5. You should therefore be aware that spellings may be inconsistent between (and

even within) individual texts, and that some texts use letter ð ('eth') interchangeably with þ ('thorn').

Religious poetry: *Caedmon's Hymn*

The earliest Old English poetry was pre-Christian, but the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons during the seventh and eighth centuries resulted in a strong tradition of religious verse. Among the genres represented are biblical paraphrase, as in *Genesis*, *Exodus* and *Daniel* in the Junius Manuscript, saints' lives, as in *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B* in the Exeter Book, and dream vision, as in *The Dream of the Rood* in the Vercelli Book. The earliest religious poem in English is recorded by the monk and historian Bede (c.673–735) within a miracle story which forms part of his most famous work, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The main character is Caedmon, a herdsman on a monastic estate (probably Whitby in northern England), who was so bad at singing that whenever his fellow workers were entertaining each other by improvising secular songs at drinking parties, he would leave before his turn came. One evening when he had done so and gone to bed, a man appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to sing. Despite his protests that he was unable to do so, the man insisted, and Caedmon was divinely inspired to compose a poem about the creation of the world. On repeating it to the abbess of the monastery the following day, he was admitted as a lay brother and spent the rest of his life turning biblical stories into verse, thus founding the English tradition of vernacular religious poetry.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* survives in a number of manuscripts, both Latin and Old English, with different versions of Caedmon's original poem. Here is one of them, with a literal translation or 'gloss' under each word and a prose translation at the end.

Nū wē sculon herian
Now we must praise
 Metodēs mihte
of the Creator might
 weorc Wuldor-fæder,
work of the Father of glory.
 ēce Dryhten,
eternal Lord

heofon-rīces Weard,
of the heavenly kingdom Guardian
 and his mōd-geþanc,
and his conception
 swā hē wundra gehwæs,
as he of wonders each
 ōr onstealde.
beginning established

Hē ærest scōp
He first created
 heofon tō hrōfe,
heaven as roof
 Pā middan-geard
Then earth
 ēce Dryhten,
eternal Lord
 fīrum foldan
for men earth

eorþan bearnum
of earth for the children
 hālig Sciepend.
holy Creator
 man-cynnes Weard,
of mankind Guardian
 æfter tēode,
afterwards adorned
 Frēa æl-mihtig.
Lord almighty

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[Now we must praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom, the might and conception of the Creator, the work of the Father of glory, as he, eternal Lord, established the beginning of each wonder. He, the holy Creator, first created heaven as a roof for the children of earth. Then the Guardian of mankind, eternal Lord, Lord almighty, afterwards adorned the earth for men.]

As you can see, the poetry does not rhyme, and neither is there a fixed number of syllables per line. Instead, Old English verse is based on rhythm and alliteration (the use of the same initial sound to link words). Each line of poetry has four main stresses, with a variable number of unstressed syllables. In modern editions, the lines are usually printed with a break in the middle, so that there are two stresses in each half-line. The two half-lines – sometimes known as the ‘*a*-verse’ and the ‘*b*-verse’ – are linked by alliteration. The first stressed syllable in the *b*-verse is known as the ‘headstave’, and it alliterates with one or both stressed syllables in the *a*-verse. In line 1, the headstave is *heofon*, alliterating with *herian*. In line 2, the headstave is *mōd*, alliterating with *Metod* and *mihte*. The second stressed syllable in the *b*-verse must not alliterate with these, but may occasionally alliterate with a different stressed syllable in the *a*-verse, or with the following line.

The main stresses are usually long syllables (syllables with a long vowel, or a short vowel followed by more than one consonant), and tend to be important words like nouns and adjectives. There are in any case fewer grammatical words than in prose. Old English poetry is a very concentrated style of writing, and the omission of many of the grammatical words, which carry less meaning, packs each line full of significant terms. Line 2b has a conjunction *and*, and line 6a has a

preposition *tō*, but otherwise this poem is composed entirely of adjectives, adverbs, nouns, pronouns and verbs.

Both stress and alliteration fall on word stems rather than on prefixes or inflexions, so they do not always come at the beginning of words. Many Old English words begin with an unstressed *ge-* prefix, so in line 3b, the fourth stress falls on the second syllable of *gehwæs*. In 4b, it falls on the second syllable of *onstealde*, and in 9b, it falls on the middle syllable of *æl-mihtig*. Some compound words may have two stresses, as on the first and third syllables of 2b *mōd-geþanc* and 7a *middan-geard*. Since line 3 alliterates on *w*, *gehwæs* might appear to break the rule whereby the second stressed syllable in the *b*-verse does not alliterate with the headstave. However, some consonant clusters such as *sc*, *sp*, *st* and *hw* alliterate only with themselves, not with single consonants. Conversely, all vowels alliterate with all other vowels, so in line 4 *ēce* alliterates with *ōr*, in line 5 *ārest* alliterates with *eorþan*, and in line 8 *ēce* alliterates with *æfter*.

Here is the poem again, with alliteration underlined (double for headstaves), and stressed syllables printed in bold:

Nū wē sculon herian
Metodes mihte
weorc Wuldor-fæder,
ēce Dryhten,
Hē ārest scōp
heofon tō hrōfe,
Pā middan-geard
ēce Dryhten,
fīrum foldan

heofon-rīces Weard,
and his mōd-geþanc,
swā hē wundra gehwæs,
ōr onstealde.
eorþan bearnum
hālig Sciepend.
man-cynnes Weard,
æfter tēode,
Frēa æl-mihtig.

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But there is more to Old English poetry than a four-stress line linked by alliteration. Other features of the verse technique represented here are:

- circumlocution
- compounds
- formulas
- poetic diction
- synonyms
- variation

Anglo-Saxon poets often use roundabout expressions, known as ‘circumlocution’ or ‘euphemism’, in preference to more straightforward terminology. For instance, God is referred to here as *heofon-rīces Weard* ‘Guardian of the heavenly kingdom’ (1b) and *man-cynnes Weard* ‘guardian of mankind’ (7b), while people are described as *eorþan bearnum* ‘the children of earth’ (5b).

Compounding is particularly common in Old English poetry. It tends to increase the weight of meaning, since a compound can express an idea more concisely than a descriptive phrase. There are six examples in this short poem:

- 1b *heofon-rīce* ‘heavenly kingdom’ (*heofon* ‘heaven’ + *rīce* ‘kingdom’)
- 2b *mōd-geþanc* ‘conception’ (*mōd* ‘mind’ + *geþanc* ‘thought’)
- 3a *Wuldor-fæder* ‘father of glory’ (*wuldor* ‘glory’ + *fæder* ‘father’)
- 7a *middan-geard* ‘earth’ (*middan* ‘middle’ + *geard* ‘dwelling’)
- 7b *man-cynn* ‘mankind’ (*mann* ‘human’ + *cynn* ‘kind, race’)
- 9b *æl-mihtig* ‘almighty’ (*æl* ‘all’ + *mihtig* ‘mighty’)

Some compounds are metaphorical rather than literal, and are known as ‘kennings’. The meaning of *middan-geard* (‘middle-dwelling’; the source of Tolkien’s ‘Middle Earth’, as noted in Chapter 1) derives from the medieval belief that earth was mid-way between Heaven and Hell.

Formulas are stock phrases – sometimes complete half-lines – which can be repeated either exactly or with minor variations in different contexts. They originated in oral tradition for the convenience of poets improvising as they went along, but formulas continued to be used in written composition. Here line 4a is identical to 8a: *ēce Dryhten* ‘eternal Lord’ was a useful formula to use in lines of religious poetry where the headstave alliterated either on a vowel or on *d*. Another formula is 1b, *heofon-rīces Weard* ‘Guardian of the heavenly kingdom’, an adaptation of the formula *rīces weard* ‘guardian of the kingdom’ used of kings in secular poetry. A similar phrase appears in 7b, *man-cynnes Weard* ‘guardian of mankind’: not a precise repetition of the formula, but a variant of it.

Partly because of the demands of alliteration, Old English poetry needed a wide vocabulary, with a range of synonyms for recurring themes such as man, warfare, and God. For instance, *Metod* (2a) and *Scieppend* (6b) both mean ‘Creator’, and *Dryhten* (4a, 8a) and *Frēa* (9b) both mean ‘Lord’. The vocabulary of Old English poetry is to

some extent different from the vocabulary of prose, and here the words *Metod* ‘God’ (2a), *fīras* ‘men’ (9a, in the dative plural *fīrum* ‘for men’) and *Frēa* ‘Lord’ (9b) are recorded only in poetry. Later stages of the language also have a poetic register – a sense that certain words are primarily suitable for use in poetry – but this is particularly pronounced in Old English, where a sizeable proportion of the known vocabulary is restricted to the poetic corpus, and referred to as ‘poetic diction’.

Finally, we come to variation. In lines 1–3a, the Subject is *wē* ‘we’ (1a), the verb phrase is *sculon herian* ‘must praise’ (1a), and there are four Direct Objects: *heofon-rīces Weard* ‘Guardian of the heavenly kingdom’ (1b), *Metodes mihte* ‘the might of the Creator’ (2a), *his mōd-geþanc* ‘his conception’ (2b), and *weorc Wuldor-fæder* ‘the work of the Father of glory’ (3a). This again is characteristic of Old English poetry. Poetry more than prose tends to have strings of parallel phrases in consecutive lines or half-lines. Sometimes these parallel phrases actually mean the same thing. In the next clause, *swā hē wundra gehwæs, ēce Dryhten, ōr onstealde* ‘as he, eternal Lord, established the beginning of each wonder’, the Subject is expressed twice, first as the pronoun *hē* ‘he’ (3b), and then as a noun phrase *ēce Dryhten* ‘eternal Lord’ (4a). Both refer to God, and both have the same function in the sentence. This repetition of an idea, using different words with the same meaning, is a common device in Old English poetry known as ‘variation’. It appears twice more even in this short poem. The Subject of the verb *scōp* ‘created’ in 5a is the pronoun *hē* ‘he’ in the same half-line, but *hālig Scieppend* ‘holy Creator’ (6b) expresses the same Subject again in a different way: ‘He, the holy Creator . . .’ The final section, lines 7–9, has three parallel Subjects for the verb *tēode* ‘adorned’, all referring to God. The first is *man-cynnes Weard* ‘Guardian of mankind’ (7b), the second *ēce Dryhten* ‘eternal Lord’ (8a), and the third *Frēa æl-mihtig* ‘Lord almighty’ (9b). Here the purpose of the variation is to repeat and reinforce the idea of God as creator and protector, which is central to the poem. In other poems, variation may serve to create suspense, to heighten tension, or to strengthen characterisation. So too with other poetic devices: for instance, alliteration may emphasise major themes, while formulas bring in associations from other contexts where the same phrases are used. As with all poetry, the first step is to appreciate the rules governing the verse form; but what really matters is the skill with which the poets exploit the conventions they are working within.

Having considered a religious poem, let us now look at some of the other main types of Old English verse: riddles, elegies and heroic poetry.

Riddles

Anglo-Saxon poets delighted in word-play, and in the deliberate exploitation of ambiguities. The Exeter Book contains about 95 riddles, which characteristically describe one thing in terms of another – for instance, an inanimate object as though it were alive, or an animal as though it were human. Some of the riddles are self-explanatory, while others are more difficult to guess, and some have not yet been solved. In the former category is the ‘Book-Moth’ riddle, a poem of just six lines comprising what have been described as ‘successions of interconnected puns organized around a central subject’.¹ It reads as follows:

Moððe word fræ̃t.
Moth words ate
 wrætlicu wyrd,
marvellous event
 þæt se wurm forswearlg
that the worm swallowed
 þēof in þýstro,
thief in darkness
 ond þæs strangan staþol.
and the strong foundation
 wihte þý gleawra,
whit the wiser

Mē þæt þūhte
To me that seemed
 þā ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
when I the wonder heard
 wera gied sumes,
of men song of a certain one
 þrym-fæstne cwide
glorious utterance
 Stæl-giest ne wæs
Thief not was
 þe hē þām wordum swealg.
because he the words swallowed

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[A moth ate words. That seemed to me a marvellous event, when I heard of the wonder, that the worm, a thief in darkness, swallowed the song of a certain man (lit. of a certain one of men), a glorious utterance, and the strong foundation. The thief was no whit the wiser because he swallowed the words.]

Ambiguous words include 3a *forswearlg* and 6b *swealg* ‘swallowed’ / ‘understood’, 4a *þýstro* ‘darkness’ / ‘ignorance’, 4b *cwide* ‘utterance’ / ‘morsel’, and 5a *stapol* ‘parchment’ (i.e. ‘foundation of writing’) / ‘intellectual foundation’. These allow the riddle to develop on two

levels, simultaneously describing a moth consuming parchment and a reader failing to gain wisdom. Human qualities are often attributed to animals or objects in the riddles: here it happens gradually during the course of the poem, as the creature moves from *moððe* ‘moth’ and *wyrm* ‘worm, insect’ in lines 1a and 3a to *þeof* ‘thief’ and *stæl-giest* ‘thief’ in 4a and 5b. All four words are given prominence through alliteration. In addition, *se wyrm* and *þeof in þýstro* are linked through variation, and *stæl-giest* is particularly striking as a unique compound from *stæl* ‘steal’ and *giest* ‘guest, stranger’. Finally, since *wyrm*, *þeof* and *stæl-giest* are all masculine nouns, the pronoun *hē* ‘he’ in 6b is both grammatically correct and also completes the transformation of the riddle’s subject from insect to person.

In many riddles, the object describes itself in the first person, a device known as ‘prosopopoeia’. Here is an example, for which several solutions have been suggested. Read through it, and see if you can work it out.

Ic eom æpelinges	eaxl-gestealla,	
<i>I am prince's</i>	<i>shoulder-companion</i>	
fyrd-rinces gefara,	frēan mīnum lēof,	
<i>warrior's comrade</i>	<i>lord to my dear</i>	
cyninges geselda.	Cwēn mec hwīlum	
<i>king's retainer.</i>	<i>Queen me sometimes</i>	
hwīt-locedu	hond on legeð,	
<i>white-locked</i>	<i>hand on lays</i>	
eorles dohtor,	þēah hēo æpelu sý.	5
<i>nobleman's daughter</i>	<i>although she noble is</i>	
Hæbbe mē on bōsme	þæt on bearwe gewēox.	
<i>Have me in bosom</i>	<i>what in wood grew</i>	
Hwīlum ic on wloncum	wicge rīde	
<i>Sometimes I on proud</i>	<i>horse ride</i>	
herges on ende.	Heard is mīn tunge.	
<i>of army at end</i>	<i>Harsh is my tongue</i>	
Oft ic wōð-boran	word-lēana sum	
<i>Often I minstrel</i>	<i>reward for words a certain</i>	
āgyfe æfter giedde.	Good is mīn wise,	10
<i>give after song</i>	<i>Good is my manner</i>	
ond ic sylfa salo.	Saga hwæt ic hātte.	
<i>and I myself dark</i>	<i>Say what I am called</i>	

[I am a prince's shoulder-companion, a warrior's comrade, dear to my lord, the king's retainer. Sometimes the fair-haired (lit. white-locked) queen, a nobleman's daughter, lays a hand on me, although she is noble. I have in my bosom what grew in the wood. Sometimes I ride on a proud horse at the head of the army. My tongue is harsh. Often I give a reward to the minstrel after a song. My manner is good, and I myself dark. Say what I am called.]

The riddle is usually taken to refer to a horn, described in its dual roles of musical instrument and drinking-vessel; but alternative suggestions include falcon, spear and sword. The description provides a number of clues before challenging the reader with a formula common to many riddles: *Saga hwæt ic hātte* 'Say what I am called'.

The same formula concludes a shorter riddle which attempts to confuse the reader as to whether the subject is human or non-human. Again, see if you can guess the answer before looking at the solution at the end – also, can you see anything wrong with the riddle itself?

Wiht cwōm gongan <i>Creature came to walk</i>	þær weras sǣton <i>where men sat</i>
monige on mæðle, <i>many at assembly</i>	mōde snottre. <i>in mind wise</i>
Hæfde ān ēage <i>Had one eye</i>	ond ēaran twā <i>and ears two</i>
ond twēgen fēt, <i>and two feet</i>	twelf hund hēafda, <i>twelve hundred heads</i>
hrycg ond wombe <i>back and stomach</i>	ond honda twā, <i>and hands two</i>
earmas ond eaxle, <i>arms and shoulder</i>	ānne swēoran <i>one neck</i>
ond sīdan twā. <i>and sides two</i>	Saga hwæt ic hātte. <i>Say what I am called</i>

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[A creature came walking where many men sat at assembly, wise in mind. It had one eye and two ears and two feet, twelve hundred heads, a back and stomach and two hands, arms and shoulder, one neck and two sides. Say what I am called.]

The solution is a one-eyed garlic seller, the 'trick' of the riddle being that in the context of vocabulary relating to parts of the body, the reference to twelve hundred heads calls to mind monsters rather than

'heads' of garlic. However, there is a problem in that the riddle is written in the third person but concludes with the customary challenge *Saga hwæt ic hātte* 'Say what I am called' in the first person. A copying error, or confusion of some kind, must have taken place.

Elegiac poetry: *Wulf and Eadwacer*

Although not 'riddles' as such, many other Old English poems use riddling techniques such as word-play and ambiguities for a range of purposes. One of the most enigmatic among several poems in the Exeter Book traditionally referred to as 'elegies' is a short piece often known as *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Like all titles given to Old English poems, this does not appear in the manuscript but is a modern construct. Some editors prefer the title *Wulf*, since it is uncertain whether Wulf and Eadwacer are different characters or the same person, or even whether these are personal names or ordinary words. Since Anglo-Saxon personal names were made up of vocabulary words, and are not capitalised in the manuscripts, it is not always clear how they are being used, and poets could deliberately exploit the ambiguity.

The poem has a female narrator, who presents herself as separated from Wulf and surrounded by hostile people who wish to capture him. The intensity of her longing for Wulf, together with the passion with which she addresses him in lines 13–15, appears to identify him as the lover described in 10–12; but in 16a she goes on to address Eadwacer, implying that he is the father of the child described punningly as a *hwelp* 'whelp' in 16b–17. Some scholars take Eadwacer to be the speaker's husband and Wulf her lover, while others think Eadwacer is the real name of a character nicknamed Wulf. Alternatively, since the literal meaning of Eadwacer is 'guardian' and that of Wulf is 'wolf', it is possible that either or both should be understood as ordinary words rather than as personal names. This would be more consistent with the other elegies, where personal names are generally avoided. On the other hand, *Wulf and Eadwacer* is already unusual among Old English poems in having a more flexible structure, with single half-lines in 3a, 8a, 17a and 19a, and a refrain in 2–3a and 7–8a. At least, this is how they are usually set out in modern editions: the verse is, as always, written consecutively in the manuscript, so it is possible that the Anglo-Saxons may have thought of it

differently. Similarly, the use of modern punctuation imposes a choice between capitals and lower-case for the initial letters of *wulf* and *eadwacer*, which in turn imposes an interpretation of personal name or vocabulary word. The manuscript presentation is much more flexible, leaving alternative possibilities open.

Try reading the poem through, and compare the printed text with the opening of the poem on folio 100^v of the Exeter Book (Illustration 13). Most of the letters are fairly similar to their modern counterparts, but the Old English alphabet had no letter *w*, using instead the runic letter ‘wynn’ (shaped like an angular *p*) which we saw in Chapter 1 (Illustration 5). Notice particularly the almost total lack of manuscript punctuation. The use of commas, exclamation marks, full stops, question marks and so on in printed editions of Old English poetry is modern, and varies from edition to edition.

Lēodum is mīnum
To people is my
 Willað h̄y hine aþecgan
Wish they him to capture
 Ungelic is ūs.

Unlike is us

Wulf is on īege,
Wulf is on island
 fæst is þæt ēg-lond,
fast is the island

Sindon wæl-rēowe
Are bloodthirsty
 Willað h̄y hine aþecgan
Wish they him to capture
 Ungelic is ūs.

Unlike is us

Wulfes ic mīnes wīd-lāstum
Of Wulf I my far wanderings
 þonne hit wæs rēnig weder
then it was rainy weather
 þonne mec se beadu-cāfa
when me the warrior
 wæs mē wyn tō þon,
was me joy to that
 Wulf, min Wulf,
Wulf my Wulf

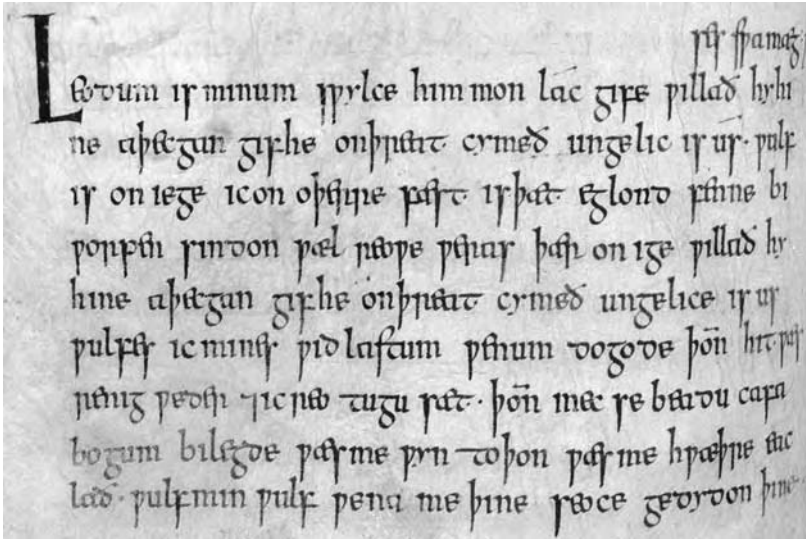
swylce him mon lāc gife.
as if them one gift might give
 gif h̄e on þrēat cymeð.
if he with a troop comes

ic on oþerre;
I on another
 fenne biworpen.
by fen surrounded
 weras þær on īge.
men there on island
 gif h̄e on þrēat cymeð.
if he with a troop comes

5

wēnum dogode;
expectations suffered
 ond ic rēotugu sæt,
and I grieving sat
 bōgum bilegde;
with limbs covered
 wæs mē hwæþre ēac lāð.
was me however also pain
 wēna mē þīne
expectations me your

10



13 Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 110^v (detail)

sēoce gedydon,
sick made

murnende mōd,
mourning mood

Gehyrest þū, Eadwacer?
Do you hear Eadwacer

bireð wulf tō wuda.
bears wolf to woods

þæt mon ēaþe tōsliteð
That one easily tears apart

uncer giedd geador.
our song together

þīne seld-cymas,
your seldom comings

nales mete-liste.
not lack of food

Uncerne earmne hwelp
Our wretched whelp

þætte nāfre gesomnad wæs:
which never joined was

15

[It is to my people as if they might be given a gift. They wish to capture him, if he comes with a troop. We are unlike. Wulf is on one island, I on another: the island is fast, surrounded by fen. The men there on the island are bloodthirsty. They wish to capture him, if he comes with a troop. We are unlike. I suffered with expectations of my Wulf's far wanderings; then it was rainy weather and I sat grieving, when the warrior covered me with his limbs: that was joy to me,

however it was also pain to me. Wulf, my Wulf, expectations of your rare visits have caused my sickness, my grieving mood, not lack of food. Do you hear, Eadwacer? A wolf will bear our wretched whelp to the woods. That which was never joined is easily torn apart: our song together.]

A wide range of interpretations have been suggested for the poem as a whole; but as with some of the riddles, no certainty has been reached. Even the narrator's gender is established only by two feminine inflexions in the second half (10b *rēotugu* and 14a *sēoce*), perhaps indicating that the poet intended to maintain ambiguity for as long as possible. Here are some questions to think about:

- Who is Wulf, and why do the narrator's people wish to capture him? One theory is that he may be a Viking raider who has made her pregnant during an earlier attack; another, that all the characters are from Germanic legend, presenting a riddle-like challenge to the reader to identify them. But the poem has also been read literally, as a fable about dogs and wolves.
- What is the *lāc* 'gift' mentioned in line 1b? Suggestions include the speaker's pregnancy, or the prospect of capturing Wulf if he returns for her. However, alternative meanings of the word as 'play' or 'message' – perhaps even 'battle' – cannot be ruled out.
- In what way are Wulf and the narrator *ungelic* 'unlike'? Perhaps in terms of race, if he is a Viking and she is Anglo-Saxon. Alternatively, *ungelic* may have the sense of 'apart', referring to their physical separation. Since the *un-* prefix in Old English occasionally has an intensifying rather than negative force, the meaning may even be 'too much alike', indicating that the lovers have committed incest – a crime taken very seriously in Anglo-Saxon society.
- Is the refrain in lines 3a and 8a supposed to be identical? The ending *-lic* in Old English identifies an adjective, while *-lice* identifies an adverb. Some scholars take the final *-e* in 8a to be a copying error, but others see significance in the movement from an adjective to an adverb. It may be relevant that spelling is not wholly consistent throughout the poem: the word for 'island' (Dative singular) is spelled *īege* in 4a but *īge* in 6b.
- Is the use of *Wulf* as personal name or word consistent throughout the poem? Most editors capitalise the occurrences in lines 4a, 9a and 13a as personal names, but take 17a *wulf* as the noun 'wolf' in

conjunction with 16b *hwelp* ‘whelp’. How logical is this – and indeed, might *Hwelp* also be a personal name?

- Why the reference to lack of food in 15b? Is the narrator being starved by her people, or fasting as a penance? Or is she not short of food at all? The statement that her grief is not caused by lack of food leaves it uncertain whether she has plenty of food, or if hunger is trivial in comparison with her other troubles.
- How many direct questions are there in the poem? As we saw in the last chapter, Old English forms questions by reversing the order of Subject and verb, so 16a *Gehȳrest þū* is punctuated with a question mark in modern editions. However, word order is more flexible in poetry than in prose, and the same reversal in 2a and 7a, *Willað hȳ* is usually taken as an ordinary statement. Again, is this logical, or should all be treated in the same way?
- Are events happening in the present or the future? Since Old English verbs have a single form for both tenses, 17a *bireð* may mean ‘bears’ or ‘will bear’, indicating either that the narrator knows her child has been taken from her, or that she fears it will be. Similarly 18a *tōsliteð* could be translated ‘tears apart’ or ‘will tear apart’.
- What is the *giedd* of 19a? The literal meaning is ‘song’ or ‘riddle’, but here a metaphorical meaning, ‘marriage’, may be suggested by similarities between line 18 and St Matthew 19:6, ‘What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder’.

Much of the attraction of this beautiful poem is its enigmatic quality. Its meaning is partly obscured by the passing of time, but its elusiveness is also a consequence of its poetic design.

Heroic poetry: *Deor*

The possibility that the protagonists of *Wulf and Eadwacer* may be characters from Germanic legend brings us to the final genre to be discussed in this chapter: heroic poetry. Heroic poetry draws on the legend cycles of the early Germanic era, often referring allusively to characters and events that were familiar to the original audience but cannot always be reconstructed by a twenty-first-century readership. An example is the Exeter Book poem *Deor*, of which the first six lines only are reproduced below.

Wēlund him be wurman	wræces cunnade.
<i>Weland him among ???</i>	<i>persecution endured</i>
Ān-hȳdig eorl	earfoþa dreag,
<i>Single-minded nobleman</i>	<i>torments suffered</i>
hæfde him to gesīþþe	sorge ond longap,
<i>had him as companion</i>	<i>sorrow and longing</i>
winter-cealde wræce.	Wēan oft onfond
<i>winter-cold suffering</i>	<i>Hardship often endured</i>
sīþþan hine Nīðhad on	nēde legde,
<i>after him Nithhad on</i>	<i>constraints laid</i>
swoncre seono-bende	on syllan monn.
<i>supple sinew-bonds</i>	<i>on better man</i>

5

[Weland endured persecution among *wurman*. The single-minded nobleman suffered torments, had as companion sorrow and longing, winter-cold suffering. He often endured hardship after Nithhad had laid constraints on him, supple sinew-bonds on the better man.]

The broad outline of the story is known. Weland was a smith-god who was captured and hamstrung by King Nithhad, and forced to work for him as the royal smith. He subsequently escaped by flying, having taken his revenge by raping Nithhad's daughter and killing his two sons, making their skulls into bowls, their eyeballs into jewels, and their teeth into brooches. The precise details of the Anglo-Saxon version are unclear, however. As in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the lack of manuscript punctuation makes it impossible to differentiate between names and nouns. Line 1a *wurman* is sometimes taken as a tribal name referring to the Vermar (the people of Värmland in Sweden), and translated 'Weland endured persecution among the Vermar'. Other scholars prefer to associate it with the Old English word *wurma* 'purple', referring to blood. Another suggestion is the word *wyrm*, which becomes *worm* in present-day English but in Old English had a wider range of meaning including 'snake' and, as we shall see in the next chapter, 'dragon'. This raises further possibilities: perhaps Weland was tortured with snakes, or was forced to make rings and other objects resembling snakes in shape; perhaps the reference is to a serpentine pattern on the sword used to hamstring him, or perhaps the worm is metaphorical, reflecting the mental anguish he suffered.

As well as dealing with legendary material, heroic poetry draws on the values of the 'heroic code', a pre-Christian tradition reflecting the



14 Franks Casket (*front panel*)

warrior culture of early Germanic society. Of central importance were the virtues of courage and honour, the duty of loyalty to one's lord, and the maintenance of a good reputation during life and after death. The most famous account of the heroic code is a description of the Germanic tribes in the first century, given by the Roman historian Tacitus in a propaganda piece *Germania*. According to Tacitus, the chief was surrounded by a group of close followers known as his *comitatus*, who owed him total allegiance and swore both to protect his life with their own and to avenge his death. In return, they ate and slept in the chief's hall, and received gifts of land and other valuables. The chief fought at the head of his troops in battle, and if he was killed no member of the *comitatus* could survive him without disgrace.

The surviving corpus of Old English contains only five 'heroic poems' based on the Germanic legend cycles: *Beowulf*, *Deor*, *Finnsburh*, *Waldere* and *Widsith*. However, many other poems make use of the heroic tradition, for instance by depicting the plight of a

lordless man, or incorporating the values of the heroic code. In lines 1–3a of the ‘Horn’ riddle discussed above, the object is personified as a member of its lord’s *comitatus*. Part II of this book will include an extract from *Beowulf* as well as an entry from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the complete texts of two poems from different genres – narrative and religious – all of which also draw strongly on the heroic tradition.

Finally, it is important to remember that Anglo-Saxon literature forms part of a continuum with other art forms. Interest in the early Germanic legend cycles is evident not only in heroic verse but in surviving artefacts. A scene from the Weland story is carved onto the front panel of the Franks Casket (Illustration 14), an eighth-century whalebone box now in the British Museum. The scene on the left shows Weland at his anvil, with two women and a man (possibly Weland’s brother Egill). The body of one of Nithhad’s sons is on the ground, and Weland seems to be offering one of the women the bowl made from the boy’s skull. On the right is a religious scene, showing the Adoration of the Magi – the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus. This is sometimes regarded as an odd juxtaposition, but it may have seemed no more strange to the Anglo-Saxons than the inclusion of poetry from different genres within a single manuscript, or (as we shall see in Part II, Text D) the use of different genres within a single poem. Indeed, represented on the same panel is another genre that we have looked at in this chapter. Around the edge is an Old English riddle written in runic script. It reads as follows:

Fisc flōdu āhōf	on fergen-berig.
<i>Fish flood cast up</i>	<i>on mountain-cliff</i>
Warþ gās-rīc grorn	þær hē on greut giswom.
<i>Became terror-king sad</i>	<i>where he on shingle swam</i>
Hronæs bān.	
<i>Whale’s bone</i>	

[The flood cast up the fish on the mountain-cliff. The terror-king became sad where he swam on the shingle. Whale’s bone.]

The riddle provides its own solution, describing the material the casket is made from: the bone of a beached whale. The casket demonstrates that riddles, religious episodes, and heroic myth could exist side by side in the rich tapestry of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Note

- 1 Fred C. Robinson, 'Artful Ambiguities in the Old English "Book-Moth" Riddle', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, IL: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 355-62. The article presents a detailed analysis of the riddle.