

EXETER BOOK ELEGIES

Most of the Old English poetry that has survived is contained in only four manuscripts. The richest and most diverse of these is Exeter Cathedral Library, Dean and Chapter MS 3501, a large anthology of secular and religious poems. The book was given to the Cathedral library at Exeter by the bishop Leofric some time before his death in 1072 CE (and has remained there ever since), but it was written probably a century earlier, somewhere in the south of England. Because some pages have been lost from the manuscript, we cannot say how many poems it originally contained, and we do not know the reasons behind its compilation. But the Exeter Book is a fascinating collection whose contents range from serious religious poetry on the Advent and Ascension of Christ, to verse lives of St Guthlac and Juliana, to a reworking of a Latin poem on the Phoenix, to a collection of almost 100 verse riddles which are sometimes comical or obscene. The poems are probably by many different authors; a poet named Cynewulf encoded his own name (in runes) in two poems, *Juliana* and *Christ II*, but all others are anonymous and untitled.

The Exeter Book includes a number of short philosophical poems, differing from one another in style and outlook but similar in tone, which have come to be known as "elegies": these are *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *The Ruin* (a short poem called *The Husband's Message* and two fragmentary poems called *Resignation A* and *B*, not translated here, are also generally considered elegies). All these titles, it must be remembered, are modern inventions, and not always the most reliable guides to the content or meaning of the poem. Likewise the modern label "elegy" is potentially misleading: in Greek and Latin literature the term refers to a particular metrical form, and since the sixteenth century the word has been used in English literature to describe a poem of mourning (the most famous examples of classic English elegies include Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*). But the term "elegy" is sometimes used more loosely to describe any serious meditative lyric poem, and it is in this broad sense that these Old English poems should be considered "elegies."

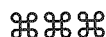
The Old English elegies are not grouped together in the Exeter Book and are all, as far as we know, by different authors, but they share certain themes and concerns—the passage of time and the transience of earthly things, the pain of exile and separation, the ache of absence and longing—as well as certain images and scenes such as ruined or abandoned buildings, desolate landscapes, storms at sea, darkness, and the chill of winter. These themes, and the traditional language in which they are presented, are found in other Old English poems—certain passages of *Beowulf* are "elegiac," if not outright "elegy"—and the contemplation of earthly mutability sometimes seems almost obsessive in Old English literature. The tone and language of elegy may have roots deep in the traditions of Germanic poetry, but it is also influenced by late classical works such as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*; the recognition that the world under the heavens is a place of tragic impermanence would probably have been regarded as equally good Christian doctrine and worldly wisdom.

Most of the Old English elegies are monologues spoken by an unidentified character whose situation is unclear but who seems to be cut off from human society and the comforts of home and companionship. But even though they share the poetic language of exile and longing, each poem has its own shape and purpose, and each makes its own statement about the problems and possibilities of earthly life. *The Wanderer* laments the passing of a whole way of life, the heroic world of the warrior's hall; *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are poems of intense personal longing for an absent husband or lover, even if their expressions of erotic desire are largely framed in the heroic language of lordship and loyalty. *Deor* stays close to the secular world of heroic legend; *The Seafarer* is explicitly and even aggressively homiletic and Christian. *The Ruin* is more detached and

dispassionate about the scene it describes (it is the only poem without a first-person narrator) and its moral judgments, if any, are implicit and indirect.

Each of the poems presented here has some structural and interpretive difficulties. *The Wanderer* is a dramatic monologue with a prologue and epilogue, but the beginnings and endings of speeches are not indicated in the manuscript and can only be guessed at. *The Seafarer* switches tone so radically that many readers (including Ezra Pound, who translated the poem) have simply rejected the second, more homiletic half. These poems develop philosophical arguments and present evidence and conclusions, but Old English poetic language is not necessarily congenial to the demands of precise reasoning; sentence boundaries and relationships between clauses are often uncertain. Other sorts of interpretive difficulties accompany the elegies. The legends and stories alluded to in *Deor*, though they may once have been familiar to its audience, are now obscure, and have to be explained by reference to other literary works in other languages, some of which are almost equally uncertain. *The Wife's Lament* is obscure more by virtue of its language than its structure—a number of the poem's key terms have more than one meaning, and there is no indication which of several ways each of them ought to be translated. And the pages of the Exeter Book containing *The Ruin* have been damaged, leaving the poem to crumble into incoherence.

All these poems (with the exception of *The Ruin*) are first-person accounts of individual emotion and experience; they seem to speak across the ages in voices whose pain often strikes a reader as vividly authentic and intimate. But their expression of individual subjectivity takes shape from deep within literary conventions, forms, and images that anchor their personal voices in a shared cultural tradition. This tension between the individual and the tradition may be an important part of the work of the Old English elegies; they dramatize the moment when an individual recognizes the universality of his or her experience, when one turns from loneliness and isolation to accept, even embrace, the shared suffering of the human condition. And despite their interpretive problems—which are found to some degree in all early literature—the Exeter Book elegies are among the most moving and powerful poems in Old English; their vision of life as both infinitely precious and inevitably transitory still strikes a responsive chord in the minds of many readers.



*The Wanderer*¹

Always the one alone longs for mercy,²
the Maker's mildness, though, troubled in mind,
across the ocean-ways he has long been forced

to stir with his hands the frost-cold sea,
and walk in exile's paths. *Wyrd*³ is fully fixed.

Thus spoke the Wanderer, mindful of troubles,
of cruel slaughters and dear kinsmen's downfall.⁴

¹ *The Wanderer* The following poems are edited by Bernard J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, revised 2nd edition (Exeter, 2000) and have been translated for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature* by R.M. Liuzza.

² *longs for mercy* The Old English word *gebidan*, translated "longs for," can also mean "awaits" or "experiences." The word *ar* "mercy" can also mean "prosperity" in an earthly sense.

³ *Wyrd* The Old English word for Fate; a powerful but not quite personified force. It is related to the verb *weorðan*, meaning roughly "to occur." Its meanings range from a neutral "event" to a prescribed "destiny" to a personified "Fate"; it is useful to think of *wyrd* as "what happens," usually in a negative sense. In a poem so preoccupied with puzzling over the nature and meaning of *wyrd*, it seemed appropriate to leave the word untranslated.

⁴ *Thus spoke ... kinsmen's downfall* Old English manuscripts do not use quotation marks, and there are no clear indications of where one speech begins and ends in this poem; we are not sure whether lines 1–5 are spoken by the same character that speaks the following lines.

over the high seas, one the gray wolf
shared with death—and one a sad-faced man
covered in an earthen grave. The Creator
85 of men thus destroyed this walled city,
until the old works of giants¹ stood empty,
without the sounds of their former citizens.

He who deeply considers, with wise thoughts,
this foundation and this dark life,
90 old in spirit, often remembers
so many ancient slaughters, and says these words:
“Where has the horse gone? where is the rider? where
is the giver of gold?
Where are the seats of the feast? where are the joys of
the hall?
O the bright cup! O the brave warrior!
95 O the glory of princes! How the time passed away,
slipped into nightfall as if it had never been!
There still stands in the path of the dear warriors
a wall wondrously high, with serpentine stains.
A storm of spears took away the warriors,
100 bloodthirsty weapons, *wyrd* the mighty,
and storms batter these stone walls,
frost falling binds up the earth,
the howl of winter, when blackness comes,
night’s shadow looms, sends down from the north
105 harsh hailstones in hatred of men.
All is toilsome in the earthly kingdom,
the working of *wyrd* changes the world under heaven.
Here wealth is fleeting, here friends are fleeting,
here man is fleeting, here woman is fleeting,
110 all the framework of this earth will stand empty.”

So said the wise one in his mind,² sitting apart in
meditation.

He is good who keeps his word,³ and the man who
never too quickly

¹ *old works of giants* Ruined buildings are called “the work of giants” (*enta geweorc*) in several places in Old English literature.

² *the wise one in his mind* Old English *snottor on mode* could also mean “the one who was wise in mind.”

³ *keeps his word* Keeps faith. These last lines offer an answer to the Wanderer’s unresolved melancholy—the wisdom of self-control and the hope of Christian salvation.

shows the anger in his breast, unless he already knows
the remedy
a noble man can bravely bring about. It will be well
for one who seeks mercy,
115 consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us
all stability stands.
—? 10TH CENTURY

The Wife’s Lament

I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing,
my own life’s journey. I am able to tell
all the hardships I’ve suffered since I grew up,
but new or old, never worse than now—
5 ever I suffer the torment of my exile.

First my lord left his people
over the tumbling waves; I worried at dawn
where on earth my leader of men might be.
When I set out myself in my sorrow,
10 a friendless exile, to find his retainers,
that man’s kinsmen began to think
in secret that they would separate us,
so we would live far apart in the world,
most miserably, and longing seized me.

15 My lord commanded me to live here;⁴
I had few loved ones or loyal friends
in this country, which causes me grief.
Then I found that my most fitting man
was unfortunate, filled with grief,
20 concealing his mind, plotting murder
with a smiling face. So often we swore
that only death could ever divide us,
nothing else—all that is changed now;
it is now as if it had never been,
25 our friendship. Far and near, I must
endure the hatred of my dearest one.

⁴ *to live here* Or, “to take up a dwelling in a grove” or “to live in a (pagan) shrine.” The precise meaning of the line, like the general meaning of the poem, is a matter of dispute and conjecture.

They forced me to live in a forest grove,
 under an oak tree in an earthen cave.¹
 This earth-hall is old, and I ache with longing;
 the dales are dark, the hills too high,
 harsh hedges overhung with briars,
 a home without joy. Here my lord's leaving
 often fiercely seized me. There are friends on earth,
 lovers living who lie in their beds,
 while I walk alone in the first light of dawn
 under the oak tree and through this earth-cave,
 where I must sit the summer-long day;
 there I can weep for all my exiles,
 my many troubles; and so I can never
 escape from the cares of my sorrowful mind,
 nor all the longings that seize me in this life.

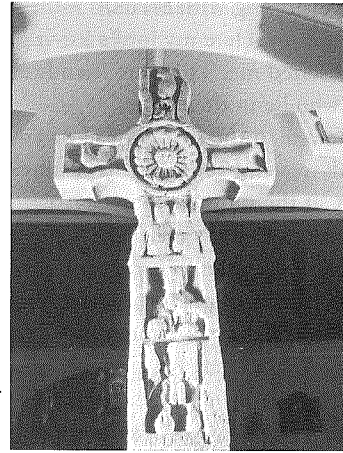
May the young man always be sad-minded²
 with hard heart-thoughts, yet let him have
 a smiling face along with his heartache,
 45 a crowd of constant sorrows. Let to himself
 all his worldly joys belong! Let him be outlawed
 in a far distant land, so that my friend sits
 under stone cliffs chilled by storms,
 weary-minded, surrounded by water
 50 in a sad dreary hall! My beloved will suffer
 the cares of a sorrowful mind; he will remember
 too often a happier home. Woe to the one
 who must wait with longing for a loved one.
 —? 10TH CENTURY

² *May the young man ... sad-minded* These difficult lines have been read as a particular reflection, imagining the mental state of her distant beloved, or as a general reflection on the double-faced nature of the world; here, following the reading of some critics, they are taken as a kind of curse, wishing upon the beloved all the suffering and sorrow felt by the speaker.

¹ *in an earthen cave* Or even "in an earthen grave or barrow."

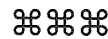
THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Although the manuscript in which this poem appears—known as the Vercelli Book¹—was copied in the tenth century, *The Dream of the Rood* may be considerably older. Several lines from the poem are carved in runic characters on a large stone monument known as the Ruthwell Cross, found in a small church in Dumfriesshire on the western border of England and Scotland. The Cross, which has been dated to the early eighth century, is elaborately carved with scenes from the Gospels and lives of the saints, antiphons in Latin, and decorative scroll-work; if the runic inscriptions were part of the original monument (and not a later addition), then *The Dream of the Rood*—or at least those portions carved on the Ruthwell Cross—would be among the earliest written Old English poems.



The Ruthwell Cross.

The Dream of the Rood tells the story of the Crucifixion of Christ from the point of view of the Cross, which appears to the narrator in a dream and recounts its experiences. Christ is presented as a heroic warrior, eagerly leaping on the Cross to do battle with Death; the Cross is a loyal retainer who is painfully and paradoxically forced to participate in his lord's execution. The narrator who witnesses this then shares his vision, describes the virtues of devotion to the Cross, and looks forward to the time when righteous Christians, protected by the Cross, are taken up into the banquet-halls of heaven. The blending of Christian themes and heroic conventions is a striking example of how the Anglo-Saxons vigorously re-imagined Christianity even as they embraced it. *The Dream of the Rood* interweaves biblical, liturgical, and devotional material with the language of heroic poetry and elegy, and something of the ambiguity and wordplay of the Riddles; its complex structure of echoes, allusions, repetitions, and verbal parallels makes it one of the most carefully constructed poems in Old English.



*The Dream of the Rood*²

Listen! I will speak of the sweetest dream,
what came to me in the middle of the night,
when speech-bearers slept in their rest.
It seemed that I saw a most wondrous tree
5 raised on high, wound round with light,

¹ The Vercelli Book (Vercelli Biblioteca Capitolare CXVII) is a collection of English religious prose and poetry written in southern England in the later tenth century, and taken to Vercelli, Italy, some time afterwards, where it still remains.

² *The Dream of the Rood* Translated by R.M. Liuzza for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*.

the brightest of beams. All that beacon was
covered in gold; gems stood
fair at the earth's corners, and there were five
up on the cross-beam. All the angels of the Lord
looked on,

10 fair through all eternity;³ that was no felon's gallows,
but holy spirits beheld him there,
men over the earth and all this glorious creation.

³ *All the angels ... through all eternity* These lines are difficult and much debated; another possible translation is "All creation, eternally fair / beheld the Lord's angel there," the Lord's angel presumably being the Cross itself, God's messenger to earth (the Greek word *angelos* meaning "messenger").

Wondrous was the victory-tree, and I was stained
 by sins,
 wounded with guilt; I saw the tree of glory
 honored in garments, shining with joys,
 bedecked with gold; gems had
 covered worthily the Creator's tree.
 And yet beneath that gold I began to see
 an ancient wretched struggle, when it first began
 to bleed on the right side. I was all beset with sorrows,
 fearful for that fair vision; I saw that eager beacon
 change garments and colors—now it was drenched,
 stained with blood, now bedecked with treasure.
 And yet, lying there a long while,
 I beheld in sorrow the Savior's tree,
 until I heard it utter a sound;
 that best of woods began to speak words:

"It was so long ago—I remember it still—
 that I was felled from the forest's edge,
 ripped up from my roots. Strong enemies seized me
 there,
 made me their spectacle, made me bear their criminals;
 they bore me on their shoulders and set me on a hill,
 enemies enough fixed me fast. Then I saw the Lord
 of mankind
 hasten eagerly when he wanted to ascend upon me.
 I did not dare to break or bow down
 against the Lord's word, when I saw
 the ends of the earth tremble. Easily I might
 have felled all those enemies, yet fast I stood.
 Then the young hero made ready—that was God
 almighty—
 strong and resolute; he ascended on the high gallows,
 brave in the sight of many, when he wanted to ransom
 mankind.
 I trembled when he embraced me, but I dared not
 bow to the ground,
 or fall to the earth's corners—I had to stand fast.
 I was reared as a cross: I raised up the mighty King,
 the Lord of heaven; I dared not lie down.
 They drove dark nails through me; the scars are still
 visible,
 open wounds of hate; I dared not harm any of them.
 They mocked us both together; I was all drenched
 with blood

flowing from that man's side after he had sent forth
 his spirit.

- 50 "Much have I endured on that hill
 of hostile fates: I saw the God of hosts
 cruelly stretched out. Darkness had covered
 with its clouds the Ruler's corpse,
 that shining radiance. Shadows spread
 55 grey under the clouds; all creation wept,
 mourned the King's fall: Christ was on the cross.
 And yet from afar men came hastening
 to that noble one; I watched it all.
 I was all beset with sorrow, yet I sank into their hands,
 60 humbly, eagerly. There they took almighty God,
 lifted him from his heavy torment; the warriors then
 left me
 standing drenched in blood, all shot through with
 arrows.
 They laid him down, bone-weary, and stood by his
 body's head;
 they watched the Lord of heaven there, who rested a
 while,
 65 weary from his mighty battle. They began to build a
 tomb for him
 in the sight of his slayer; they carved it from bright
 stone,
 and set within the Lord of victories. They began to
 sing a dirge for him,
 wretched at evening, when they wished to travel hence,
 weary, from the glorious Lord—he rested there with
 little company.¹
- 70 And as we stood there, weeping, a long while
 fixed in our station, the song ascended
 from those warriors. The corpse grew cold,
 the fair life-house. Then they began to fell us
 all to the earth—a terrible fate!
- 75 They dug for us a deep pit, yet the Lord's thanes,
 friends found me there ...
 adorned me with gold and silver.²

¹ *with little company* i.e., utterly alone.

² *adorned me with gold and silver* There is no gap in the manuscript here, but something is obviously missing—the story of the Finding of the True Cross, told (among other places) in the Old English poem *Elene* later in the Vercelli Book. The Cross is buried, hidden, forgotten, then recovered by Helen, mother of the emperor Constantine; its authenticity is established and it becomes an object of veneration and sign of victory.

"Now you can hear, my dear hero,
 that I have endured the work of evil-doers,
 80 harsh sorrows. Now the time has come
 that far and wide they honor me,
 men over the earth and all this glorious creation,
 and pray to this sign. On me the Son of God
 suffered for a time; and so, glorious now
 85 I rise up under the heavens, and am able to heal
 each of those who is in awe of me.
 Once I was made into the worst of torments,
 most hateful to all people, before I opened
 the true way of life for speech-bearers.
 90 Lo! the King of glory, Guardian of heaven's kingdom
 honored me over all the trees of the forest,
 just as he has also, almighty God, honored
 his mother, Mary herself,
 above all womankind for the sake of all men.

95 "Now I bid you, my beloved hero,
 that you reveal this vision to men,
 tell them in words that it is the tree of glory
 on which almighty God suffered
 for mankind's many sins
 100 and Adam's ancient deeds.
 Death He tasted there, yet the Lord rose again
 with his great might to help mankind.
 He ascended into heaven. He will come again
 to this middle-earth to seek mankind
 105 on doomsday, almighty God,
 the Lord himself and his angels with him,
 and He will judge—He has the power of judgment—
 each one of them as they have earned
 beforehand here in this loaned life.
 110 No one there may be unafraid
 at the words which the Ruler will speak:
 He will ask before the multitude where the man
 might be
 who for the Lord's name would taste
 bitter death, as He did earlier on that tree.
 115 But they will tremble then, and little think
 what they might even begin to say to Christ.
 But no one there need be very afraid
 who has borne in his breast the best of beacons;
 but through the cross shall seek the kingdom

120 every soul from this earthly way,
 whoever thinks to rest with the Ruler."

Then I prayed to the tree with a happy heart,
 eagerly, there where I was alone
 with little company. My spirit longed to start
 125 on the journey forth; it has felt
 so much of longing. It is now my life's hope
 that I may seek the tree of victory
 alone, more often than all men,
 and honor it well. I wish for that
 130 with all my heart, and my hope of protection is
 fixed on the cross. I have few wealthy friends
 on earth; they all have gone forth,
 fled from worldly joys and sought the King of glory;
 they live now in heaven with the High Father,
 135 and dwell in glory, and each day I look forward
 to the time when the cross of the Lord,
 on which I have looked while here on this earth,
 will fetch me from this loaned life,
 and bring me where there is great bliss,
 140 joy in heaven, where the Lord's host
 is seated at the feast, with ceaseless bliss;
 and then set me where I may afterwards
 dwell in glory, have a share of joy
 fully with the saints. May the Lord be my friend,
 145 He who here on earth once suffered
 on the hanging-tree for human sin;
 He ransomed us and gave us life,
 a heavenly home. Hope was renewed
 with cheer and bliss for those who were burning there.
 150 The Son was successful in that journey,
 mighty and victorious, when he came with a multitude,
 a great host of souls, into God's kingdom,
 the one Ruler almighty, the angels rejoicing
 and all the saints already in heaven
 155 dwelling in glory, when almighty God,
 their Ruler, returned to his rightful home.

—IOTH CENTURY

¹ *Hope was renewed ... burning there* A well-known Christian tradition known as the "Harrowing of Hell" tells how Jesus, after his death on the Cross, descended into Hell and broke open its gates, releasing the souls of those unjustly imprisoned by Satan since the Creation of human beings. He conveyed them to Heaven, then returned to earth in time for his resurrection.

rime. pæde pif nebid. fnoetcon pæpæ epæfæz pæpæ
 pæpæ æton to þam bæpæn næpæ cunnan hygean pæpæn
 pæ pæ hærpæn læhte æppe mid ænglæn ægan mæton
 gæfæm to georce þonne god pæpæ æpædæn lîpæ ænde ge
 pæpæn.

Hæt ic fæpæn gîfe sægan pæpæ hæc mæge mæce
 to midpæ mæce æpæpæn pæpæ bîpæn pæpæ pæpæn
 pæpæ mæ pæpæ ic ge pæpæ pæpæ pæpæ onlîpæ
 lædan læhte be pæpæn bæma bæpæpæ æll pæpæ
 bæcæn pæpæ be georcn mid golde gîmmæpæpæ pæpæ
 æt pæpæn fædæm. fæpæ pæpæ pæpæ pæpæn æppe
 onpæn æpæ ge fæpæn be hæpæn pæpæ ængl æpæ
 næ ælle pæpæ pæpæ pæpæ ge fæpæ næpæ æpæpæ
 pæpæpæ pæpæ. ælme pæpæ be hæpæn hæpæ pæpæ
 mæ æpæ mæpæn pæpæ pæpæ mæpæ ge fæpæ.
 Syllæ pæpæ pæ pæpæ bæm pæ pæpæ pæpæ pæpæ
 mid pæpæ ge fæpæ ic pæpæpæ pæpæ. pæpæ ge pæpæ
 pæpæ pæpæ pæpæ mid golde gîmmæpæpæ
 be pæpæ pæpæpæ pæpæpæ pæpæ. pæpæpæ ic
 pæpæ pæpæ gold onpæn mæpæ pæpæpæ æpæpæ
 pæpæ hæ æpæpæ onpæn fæpæpæ onpæn pæpæ
 ællæ pæpæ mid pæpæpæ pæpæpæ. pæpæpæ ic pæpæ pæpæ
 pæpæ pæpæpæ ge pæpæ ge pæpæ ic pæpæpæ pæpæ.

The Vercelli Book, fol. 104v, containing lines 1–21 of *The Dream of the Rood*.