

# Old & Early Middle English Literature

Translations by Ken Eckert

Old Germanic poetry generally does not rhyme—it alliterates. A normal line has two half-lines separated by a pause (*caesura*, /). There are usually three alliterated consonants or vowels on a line. Vowels often alliterate with any vowel.

The Hanyang students / heard and helped  
But beer and bibimbap / came between  
Now earth and air / ails their heads

## Caedmon's Hymn

*Late 7th century.* The oldest existing poem in English. Caedmon was an illiterate farmer working at a monastery who reported a religious vision commanding him to sing.

Nu sculon herigean / heofonrices Weard  
Meotodes meahte / and his modgeþanc  
weorc Wuldor-Fæder / swa he wundra gehwæs  
ece Drihten / or onstealde  
He ærest sceop / ielda bearnum  
heofon to hrofe / halig Scyppend  
ða middangeard / moncynnes Weard  
ece Drihten / æfter teode  
firum foldan / Frea ælmihtig.

## Anglo-Saxon Riddle #27

*About 970*

Ic eom weorð werum, wide funden  
brungen of bearwum ond of burghleoþum  
of denum ond of durum. Dægæs mec wægum  
feþre on lifte feredon mid liste  
under hrofes hleo. Hæleð mec siþþan  
baþedan in bydene. Nu ic eom bindere  
ond swingere sona weorpe  
esne to eorþan hwilum ealdne ceorl.  
Sona þæt onfindeð se þe mec fehð ongean  
ond wið maegenþisan minre genæsteð  
þæt he hrycge sceal hrusan secan  
gif he unrædes ær ne geswiced  
strengo bistolen strong on spræce  
mægene binumen; nah his modes geweald  
fota ne folma. Frige hwæt ic hatte  
ðe on eor an swa esnas binde  
dole æfter dyntum be dægæs leohte.

## Caedmon's Hymn

*Late 7th century*

Now we must praise the heavenly kingdom's guardian,  
The measurer's might, and His mind-plans—  
The work of the Father of Glory, of His wonders done.  
The eternal Lord established all beginnings.  
He first created, for the sons of men,  
Heaven as a roof—the holy creator—  
Then Earth in the middle, man's protector.  
The eternal Lord after this made  
The lands for men—Father almighty!

## Anglo-Saxon Riddle #27

*About 970*

I am valuable to men, widely found,  
brought from burrows and from mountain slopes,  
from valleys and hills. By day I'm carried by wings  
aloft in the air, transported with skill  
under the roof's cover. A man then bathes  
me in a tub. Now I tie up  
and lash out, how quickly I throw  
a man to earth, sometimes an old fool!  
Soon he will find, he who struggles against me,  
and with violence contends with me,  
that he will find the earth on his back  
if he refused to stop his thoughtlessness,  
deprived of strength, violent in speech,  
deprived of might; he has not his mind's power  
in his feet nor hands. Ask what I am called,  
who on earth binds up such men,  
the foolish, from blows by the day's light.

(Probable answer: *Mead*, honey beer)

**The Seafarer***About 970*

Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,  
 sipas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum  
 earfoðhwile oft þrowade,  
 bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,  
 gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela,  
 atol yþa gewealc, þær mec oft bigeat  
 nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan,  
 þonne he be clifum cnossað.  
 Calde geþrunge  
 wæron mine fet, forste gebunden  
 caldum clomum, þær þa ceare seofedun  
 hat ymb heortan; hungor innan slat  
 merewerges mod. Þæt se mon ne wat  
 þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,  
 hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ  
 winter wunade wræccan lastum,  
 winemægum bidroren,  
 bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag.  
 þær ic ne gehyrde butan hlimman sæ,  
 iscaldne wæg. Hwilum ylfete song  
 dyde ic me to gomene, ganotes hleoþor  
 ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor weras,  
 mæw singende fore medodrince.  
 Stormas þær stanclifu beotan, þær him stearn  
 oncwæð,  
 isigfeþera; ful oft þæt earm bigeal,  
 urigfeþra; nænig hleomæga  
 feascaftig ferð frefran meahte.  
 Forþon him gelyfeð lyt, se þe ah lifes wyn  
 gebiden in burgum, bealosiþa hwon,  
 wlone ond wingal, hu ic werig oft  
 in brimlade bidan sceolde.

Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,  
 ond þonne gebencan hu we þider cumen;  
 ond we þonne eac tilien þæt we to moten  
 in þa ecan eadignesse  
 þær is lif gelong in lufan Dryhtnes,  
 hyht in heofonum. Þæs sy þam Halgan þonc  
 þæt he usic geweorþade, wuldres Ealdor  
 ece Dryhten, in ealle tid. Amen.

**Middle English Bestiary (The Whale)***About 1250*

Cethegrande is a fis  
 ðe moste ðat in water is;  
 ðat tu wuldes seien get,  
 gef ðu it soge wan it flet,  
 ðat it were á neilond

**The Seafarer***About 970*

I can by myself relate my sorrowful past—  
 Talk about former times, how I in toilsome days  
 often endured desperate moments.  
 Bitter cares have I abided in my breast,  
 explored in a boat many sorrowful places,  
 the terrible tossing of waves —where the night-watch  
 often seized me at the stem of the ship  
 when it crashes upon the cliffs.  
 Oppressed by chills were my feet,  
 bound up by frost, with cold chains,  
 where these sorrows sighed hot about the heart —  
 hunger tearing within the sea-wearied mind.  
 He does not know this fact  
 who dwells most merrily on dry land—  
 how I, wretchedly sorrowful, lived a winter  
 on the ice-cold sea, upon the tracks of exile,  
 deprived of friendly kinsmen,  
 hung with rimy icicles. Hail flies in showers.  
 There I heard nothing except the rushing sea,  
 the ice-cold waves. Sometimes the swan's song  
 I kept to myself as diversion, the cry of the gannet  
 and the shorebird's voice for the laughter of men—  
 the seagull's singing for the drinking of mead.  
 Storms beat the stony cliffs there, where the tern calls  
 with icy feathers. Very often the eagle screeches  
 with wet feathers. No sheltering kinsfolk  
 could comfort this impoverished spirit.  
 Therefore he really doesn't believe it—  
 he who owns the joys of life and very little  
 of the perilous paths, living in the city,  
 proud and wine-flushed — how I must often  
 endure on the briny ways wearied.

Let us consider where we should make our home,  
 and then think about how we may come there again—  
 and then we should strive also  
 so that we may be allowed to do so,  
 into those eternal beatitudes—  
 There life overflows to the love of the Lord,  
 hope in heaven. Thanks be to the Holy One,  
 so that he may honor us, the Lord of Glory,  
 Eternal Master, for all time. Amen.

**Middle English Bestiary (The Whale)***About 1250*

The whale is a fish  
 The biggest one that's in the water;  
 You would certainly say,  
 If you saw it when it floats,  
 That it was an island

ðat sete one ðe se sond.  
 ðis fis ðat is vnríde,  
 ðanne him hungreð he gapeð wide,  
 vt of his ðrote it smit an onde,  
 ðe swetteste ðing ðat is o londe;  
 ðer-fore oðre fisses to him dragen,  
 wan he it felen he aren fagen,  
 he cumen and houen in his muð,  
 of his swike he arn uncuð;  
 ðis cete ðanne hise chaeles lukeð,  
 ðise fisses alle in sukeð,  
 ðe smale he wile ðus biswiken,  
 ðe grete maig he nogt bigripen.  
 ðis fis wuneð wið ðe se grund,  
 and liueð ðer eure heil and sund,  
 til it cumeð ðe time  
 ðat storm stireð al ðe se,  
 ðanne sumer and winter wínnen;  
 ne mai it wunen ðer-inne,  
 so droui is te sees grund,  
 ne mai he wunen ðer ðat stund,  
 oc stireð up and houeð stille;  
 wílles ðar weder is so ille,  
 ðe sipes ðat arn on se fordriuen,  
 loð hem is ded, and lef to liuen,  
 biloken hem and sen this fis,  
 an eilond he wenen it is,  
 ðer-of he aren swiðe fagen,  
 and mid here migt ðar-to he dragen,  
 sipes on festen,  
 and alle up gangen;  
 of ston mid stel in ðe tunder  
 wel to brennen one ðis wunder,  
 warmen hem wel and heten and dríngen;  
 ðe fir he feleð and doð hmi sinken,  
 for sone he diueð dun to grunde,  
 he drepeð hem alle wið-uten wunde.

### *Significatio*

dis deuel is mikel wið wil and magt  
 so wicches hauen in here craft,  
 he doð men hungren and hauen ðrist,  
 and mani oðer sinful list,  
 tolleð men to him wið his onde  
 wo so him folegeð he fineð sonde;  
 ðo arn ðe little in leue lage,  
 ðe mikle ne maig he to him dragen:  
 ðe mikle, I mene ðe steadfast  
 in rigte leue mid fles and gast.  
 Wo so listneð deueles lore,  
 On lengðe it sal him rewen sore;  
 Wo so festeð hope on him,  
 He sal him folgen to helle dim.

That sits on the sand.  
 This fish is huge;  
 When he's hungry he opens wide,  
 And out of his throat his breath emits—  
 The sweetest thing that's in the world;  
 Thus the fishes draw near,  
 When they feel it and are happy;  
 They come and hover near his mouth.  
 Of his treachery they are ignorant.  
 Then the whale clamps his jaws  
 And these fish are sucked in.  
 He thus betrays the little ones!  
 The great ones he can't grasp.  
 This fish stays on the bottom of the sea  
 And lives there, whole and sound,  
 Until it comes to the time  
 That storms stir all the sea,  
 When summer and winter battle.  
 Then it cannot dwell there,  
 So turbulent is the sea bottom.  
 He cannot stay in that place,  
 But starts up and floats,  
 While the weather is so bad;  
 Then the sailors that are cast about,  
 Who hate to die and love to live,  
 Look about and see this fish,  
 And believe it to be an island,  
 And are overjoyed;  
 And with all their might they steer there  
 To anchor tightly  
 And climb up as one.  
 From stone and steel they find kindling,  
 Good to burn on this strange place,  
 They warm themselves and eat and drink;  
 But he feels the fire and sinks down,  
 And at once he dives down;  
 He kills them all without even a wound.

### *Meaning*

The Devil is great in will and might;  
 Just as witches are with their craft,  
 He makes men hunger and thirst,  
 And many other sinful lusts,  
 Drawing men to him with his scent.  
 Whoever follows him will find shame!  
 They are the less in faith's law,  
 The more they might toward him draw;  
 The crowd, I mean the faithful  
 In righteous law with flesh and spirit,  
 Who listen to the Devil's stories,  
 In the end will regret it sorely.  
 Whoever fastens their hope on him,  
 They will follow him to dark hell.