

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 / aches 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. Dægес mec wægун
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 dægес 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 clommum, 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 earn bigeal,
 urigfeþra; nænig hleomæga
 feascaftig ferð frefran meahte.
 Forþon him gelyfeð lyt, se þe ah lifes wyn
 gebiden in burgum, bealosiþa hwon,
 wlonc ond wingal, hu ic werig oft
 in brimlade bidan sceolde.

Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,
 ond þonne geþencan 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 vnride,
 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 winnen;
 ne mai it wunen ðer-inne,
 so droui is te sees grund,
 ne mai he wunen ðer ðat stund,
 oc stireð up and houed stille;
 willes 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 drinken;
 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.