

Translations from Anglo-Saxon Poetry

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The Wife's Lament
The Seafarer
The Battle of Brunaburh
The Dream of the Rood
The Wanderer



The Wife's Lament

I will speak my plight's tale, care-
wretched, about myself. I can say: what
woes I've borne growing up, present
and past, were all less than now. I have
won, for my exile-paths, just pain.

First, my lord left: over deep seas, far
from people, and I've grieved each
morning, where, earth-wide, he could
be. Then I left: voyaging sought service
– sad exile – for my woeful desires!

My lord's kin schemed secretly: that
they'd estrange us, keep us most apart,
across the earth-kingdom, and my heart
suffered. My lord bade me: take
dwelling here. I had few friends in

this land, no devoted comrades – so I
feel as if lost! I had found a man full fit
to me, though unfortunate, spiritually
fraught – a feigning mind, bliss-
visaged, but planning a crime! Full

oft we vowed we'd never part, not till
death alone, nothing else; but that is
changed, our friendship – is now, as if
it never were. I must hear, far and near,
contempt for my loved. My man

bade me live by the grove's wood,
 beneath the oak tree, in an earth-cave.
This cave is old – I am all oppressed –
 the valleys dim, mountains steep – a
 bitter home! tangled with vines –

an arid dwelling! The cruelty hits often
 – my lord's absence! On earth there are
lovers, living in love, they share the
 same bed, meanwhile... I go alone each
 dawn, by the oak and earth-cave,

where I sit, summerlong days. There, I
 might weep my exile-paths, its many
woes, because an anxious mind won't
 rest, nor this sorrow, which wrests from
 me this life. A young man must be

stern, hard-of-heart, stand blissful,
 opposing breast-cares and his sorrows'
legions. All world-joy should wake
 from himself, for wide and far, in
 foreign folk-lands, my friend sits

under a hard slope, frosted by storms,
 silenced for a friend, water bordering
his sad-hall! My friend suffers sorrow;
 he know too oft his home was joyful.
 Woe to those who live longing all

for a loved one.

The Seafarer

May I myself tell a true story: how
I, on journeys, bore hardship often,
and for toilsome days, housed
bitter breast-cares – lived in ships
of woe, the wrathful tossing of
waves! I was fear-taunted at
nightwatch, as the ship's prow
tossed close to cliffs. My feet –
fettered by cold, as with chains –
were frost-ringed. Sorrow groaned
hot round my heart, hunger tore
from bowels, spirit stifled by

sea-weariness! A man on land
doesn't know the life he leads is
pleasantest. Nor how I, care-
wrecked, on the ice-cold sea,
survived winter in these exile-
paths: cut off from kinsmen,
icicles my companions! Hail flew
in showers. I heard nothing but the
sounding sea, the waves ice-cold.

Song of the swan for pleasure, I
took the cry of gannets, the blabber
of curlews for laughter, and

the seagull's wail for mead-drink.

Storms beat the stone-cliffs; there
the tern called them, icy-feathered.

Full oft the eagle cried, dewy-
feathered! I had no shipmate to
share such barrenness. That
man who found life's joy city-
dwelling, proud and wine-plump,
without such adversities, cannot
think how I struggled tired, often,
on the sea. Night-shadows
darkened; it snowed from the

north; hoarfrost surrounded
the earth. Hail fell ground-ward,
coldest kernel. But then, my
heart's thoughts urge I leave, live
the deeps myself, the play of sea
waves. And mind-lust urges,
always, my soul: that I go forth,
seek strangers' territories, far off.
For there is no man on earth so
arrogant, nor whose giving is so
gracious, nor who, youthful, is so
vigorous, nor who is so deed-

brave, nor whose lord is so
generous, that he takes to the sea
indifferent to the Lord's wishes.

His mind is not on harps, or ring-
receiving, not on a woman's
pleasures, or on ambitions –
on nothing: just the tossing of
waves. He has longings always,
who treks sea-ward. Groves adopt

a blossom-sheen, the city
beautifies, and hills self-animate –
the world rushes on! These

things all urge the eager soul – to
depart! travel wide on the flood-
ways. So the cuckoo moans with its
mournful murmur. Summer's
harbinger sings, inspires sorrows,
heart-bitter. That man is
ignorant, fortunate man! of what
those undergo who wend exile's
paths widest. For now my mind
breaks out of my soul's breast,
heart amid the sea's flood, over the
whale's home, and travels

widely the earth's lengths, coming
back – ravenous and greedy! The
lone flyer cries, lures me onto the
whale-way, and the breast over the
sea-stretch irresistibly. So for me,
Lord's joy is hotter than this
dead land-life, that is but fleeting. I
do not think earth-riches stand
eternally. One of three things,
invariably, suddenly, raises doubt:
disease, age, or sword-violence –
takes away life! from the

doomed, the destined to die. So, for
each soldier, praise of the later-

living is the best memorial he
 wins, that, ere he leaves, his earth-
doings – against enemies' evil,
 great deeds against the devil –
make sons of the old praise him; so
 his praise then lives with the
angels, eternal glory of life, a joy
 for heaven's hosts. Those days
have passed, the pomp of earth-
 treasures. No kings, emperors,

or patron gold-givers, now, such as
 there were, when they themselves
won achievement, lived lordly in
 fame. Dead is that godly host,
those joys gone; the weaker thrive,
 keep this world throbbing;
they turn it through toil. Fame is
 thrust down, earth's nobility
wastes, withers, so it is likewise for
 many: Age comes... face pales...
white-haired, he moans... old
 friends, prince's sons, he has

known, die! entering the earth. He
 whose soul's vacant, gone, cannot
taste sweetness, cannot sense
 torture, cannot lift a hand, has no
light in his mind. Though the
 brother wants to strew his
brother's grave with gold, bury
 him with bounty that he garnered

with him, a soul full of sin will not
be helped by this – by the power of
God! – though he hid his sin on
earth when alive. Great is the

Creator's might: he moves the earth.

He made the ground, the acres of earth
and the heavens firm. He is a fool who
is not Lord- fearing: death fells him
suddenly. He is blessed who lives
humbly: heaven's mercy finds him
– a bearing God-given, for
those born to His bounty. Man should
steer with a strong soul, hold that
posture firm, and be loyal to all, and of
action pure. Man should hold the spirit
even, equal for loved and loathed, and
not burn a new-made friend – with
a torch, or on an altar!

Fate is might: the Creator more mighty
– than the meaning of any man! Let us
think where *home* is, then hope to get
there, to the blessedness that is eternal
life – in the Lord's love, in heaven's
heights! Give thanks for the Holy,
because he honored us,

Prince of Glory! Lord Everlasting,
and of all eternity. Amen.

The Battle of Brunanburh

That year King Aethelstan, lord of Earls,
warrior's patron, and his brother also, Prince
Edmund, gained glory
eternal by the blade's

edge, at battle in Brunanburh. Edward's
descendants, they scaled the shield-wall,
sliced linden with hammer-
blows – a natural

passion for them, known from posterity, that
they at war hold firm from danger: land,
hoard and home. Enemy
Scots fell dead;

sailors faltered, fated to die. The field
blackened with men's blood, from time when
the morning sun – glor-
ious star! – glided

over the grounds – God's bright candle! of
the Lord eternal! – till the noble disk sank to
its seat. Many men, shredded
by spears, lay

there – Northern men, shattered over shield,
and scores of Scots, sated with war, ex-
hausted. The West Saxons
burned, all day, in

troops, a path forward – after the detested
people! They cut down fugitives fiercely from
behind with swords grind-
stone-sharp. The

Mercians refused rough hand-play to none,
not one hero, who, in ships' wombs, had
sought land with Anlaf,
over the sea's

clamor – but doomed in battle! Five young
kings – enslumbered by the sword! – lay on
the slaughter-field. And
seven Earls of

Anlaf! numberless shipmen, and of the army,
and Scots. The Northerns' leader was pushed
to flight, forced to the ship's
prow with a

trifling corps. The ship crowded onto the sea
– the king flew! forth on the darkening sea,
salvaged his life. Old
Constantine also

journeyed north, to his native land! Hoary
warrior – now, not able to exult in swung
swords! Thrashed of kins-
men, thrust from

his friends, beat on the battlefield at war – he
left his own son, so young! on the slaughter-
place, wound-ravaged. Gray-
haired man – he

could not boast of the battle-clash! no more
than Anlaf! Old wily-one! They could not,
among such tattered
squadrons, laugh that

their war-field work was superior – not in the
rush of standards! in the meeting of spears!
in the bruising of men! in
the weapons’

exchange! when, with the kin of Edward,
they sported on that slaughter-field. Then the
Normans – arrows’ sad
survivors! – left in

nailed-ships over Dingesmere, again over
deep water seeking Dublin – in Ireland, but
ashamed in spirit. So the
brothers – King

and Prince both – sought native turf, the land
of the West-Saxons, cheering war. Corpses
were left to be mashed
by the rook, horny-

beaked and dark-coated, and by the dun-
coated, white-headed eagle – a feast for the

greedy war-hawk! then that
gray beast, the

wolf of the wild. Since then, not more have
fallen on this island, more folk downed than
by these sword-edges – so
the book says, and

old wise scholars – since that time when
Angles and Saxons came hither, from the
east sought Britain, over
stretched sea –

proud warmakers! – glorious Earls! – and
beat the Welsh,
and found a homeland.

The Dream of the Rood

Listen! I want to tell the best dream, of what I
dreamt in night's pitch, when all mankind
is slouched in their couches. I thought I saw the
finest tree, stretching to sky, compassed by
light – of crosses brightest! This beacon was all
gold-strung, fine jewels earth-spread before
it, and five set in the shoulders' span. All saw God's
angel there, splendid through

eternity. No, this was no criminal's gallow! Holy
spirits attended to see it, and all earth's men
– the entire cosmos! Amazing was this victory beam!
And I – sullied with sins, dark with stains. I
saw the Tree of Glory, clothed in garments beauti-
fully shining, and decked with gold. Gems
worthily clad this Ruler's tree. Yet, I was able to see,
through the gold-radiance, the

wretched men's strife it suffered earlier, bleeding
from its right. I was trembling care-
wrecked, fearing the wondrous apparition. I saw the
brilliant beam – alter clothes and colors!
Now, it was liquid-moist, drenched with blood's
flow! Now, it was traced with treasures. So,
lying there a long time, I saw, saddened, the Savior's
Cross, until I heard it talk. This

best of woods started to speak these words: "That
was years ago – I yet remember – when I

was felled by the forest's edge, ripped from my roots.
The strong foes took me, planning a show,
and ordered me to hold their felons. They carried me
by shoulder to a hill's stretch, on which I
was stood; many foes fastened me there. I saw
mankind's Lord hasten eagerly, for
he wanted to climb onto me! I dared not, then – over
God's word! – bend or break, for I saw the
earth's face shimmer. I might have killed all the
fiends, but stood firm. The young hero, who
was God Almighty, then stripped, strong and sure of
mind. He scaled the lofty gallows, bold in
men's sight, for he sought to save mankind. When
the Man grasped me – I shook! but
I dared not bend, or fall to the land's length, for I
had to stand rigid. I was built as a Rood; I
held the rich King, heaven's Lord; I dared not stoop.
They drove dark nails through me; on me,
the wounds can yet be seen, exposed, malicious. I
dared not complain of any of this. They
mocked us together, both. I was soaked with blood,
that spurting from this Man's side,
for he had sent his spirit onward. I lived the worst
fate on that hill, witnessed the host God
stretched out miserably. Mists' darkness covered the
Savior, his corpse the shiniest radiance!
Obscured under clouds, a shadow flew away. All
creation wept, lamented the King's death:
Christ was on the Rood. After this, from afar came

eager ones to the Prince; I saw all
that. Sore, I was care-wracked, but I bent hands-wide
to the men, avid, humbly. They took their
Almighty God, held his body torture-heavy. The
warriors let me stand blood-drenched; I was
wounded all through with arrows. They laid the
limb-weary down, stood at his body's head.
And they beheld there Heaven's Lord; he rested a
while, weary after the great battle.

They began to build a sepulcher in sight of the
Cross. They carved it from bright stone, and
set therein Victory's Savior; they began a dirge, sad
in this night time. Then they, weary, had to
leave the fine Being; he rested there alone. So we
stood there weeping a while, still, after the
foes' voices grew; the corpse grew cold, lovely Form.
Then they began to fell us, fold us

earth-towards – a terrible fate! They closed us in a
deep cave; but the Lord's friends and
servants learned our location – clothed me with
silver and gold! Now you must hear, dear
warrior, that I have borne bad men's deeds, the most
sore cares. The time comes that all men all
over revere me – on the earth, the entire creation! –
and send prayers to this sign. On

me, God's Being pained, and for that I am glorious,
a tower under heaven! and may heal all who
fear me. Once I became tortures' worst, men's most-

hated, before I opened Life's way – the True
bearing – to the dwellers of earth. Listen! the Elder
of wonders chose me over other wild trees!
Heaven's Guardian! as he had his mother also, Mary
herself, whom Almighty God

honored over all wife-kind. Now I order, dear
soldier, that you show this to each man, and
reveal word-wise: That this is Wonder's tree, on
which Almighty God suffered, for
mankind's sins, and Adam's early deeds. He tasted
death there; but the Lord again rose, with
his raw might, to help man; He climbed to heaven
there. Again he will set forth on

this middle-earth, on Doomsday to seek mankind,
the Lord himself with his angels, Almighty
God, at Judgment time, and he will judge each of
them according as they acted here earlier,
during this flying life. None of them must be
unheedful of the Creator's words; he asks
many where that man is, who for God's name would
taste bitter death, as *He* had on this

tree. But they will be afraid; only few know what to
start to say to Christ. None need be fearful,
who bear breast-close this finest beacon, but through
this Rood each soul must seek the Kingdom
– far from these earth-ways – who, with the Creator,
wants to live.” I prayed, zealously, to the
beam with bright mind, for I was alone there,
companionless. My heart drew

forth to the path-ways; my desire was powerful. It is
now my life's glory that I seek this signal-
beam alone, more often than others, and well honor
it. I have a drive to do this; it crowds my
mind; now all my solace's hope lies in the Rood. I
have not many rich friends on these earth-
lengths, but they have gone forth from this world's
splendors, sought the king of

wonders, and are now in heaven – with the High-
father, living in glory! And I live each day
for when the Lord's Rood – which I saw here earlier
on earth – will fly me from this fleeting life,
and bring me... to where there is a great bliss,
heaven's vision, and God's folk seated at
feast! A continuous joy! and for me to be set down,
that I henceforth walk in wonder,

well amid the Holy Ones – and drink of dreams! I
would be the Lord's friend, who on earth
pained earlier on the gallow tree, for men's sins – he
saved us, gave us back life, a heaven-home.
Joy was renewed – with blessing, with bliss – for
those in hell's torment. The Son's expe-
dition was victorious, strong and successful,
when he, Creator Almighty,

arrived with angels into God's reign, to happiness
among spirits and the Saints, all already
living in heaven's splendor, when their Creator came
– God Almighty – to his own land.

The Wanderer

The lonely wanderer often wants mercy, God's
grace, because he, care-heavy, must stir with his

hands through water-ways, the rime-cold sea,
and journey an exile's paths. Fate is full fixed!

So the earth-stepper spoke, pained with torment
– of cruelest slaughters, the fall of friends:

“Alone, each morning, I must utter my cares.
There is no man now alive to whom, openly, I

dare speak my mind. I know now: it is a noble
trait, that a man binds fast his soul-cage, keeps

in his heart-casement, believe what he will. A
weary mood cannot fight fate, the mind heaps

no help, because *their* judgment – sadly, deep in
the breast-coffin – holds him fast! Such the way

I – care-poor, home-barren, orphaned from my
tribe – must bear in fetters, for the many years

since I buried my gold-friend in dark earth; I,
wretched, have since trekked full of winter-cares

over the waves' laces, sad for hall-want, seeking
a treasure-giver, and wherever I might find in a

mead hall one knowing my *own*, or who would
console me – friendless – and entertain me with
joys. He knows who has lived: how cruel care is
to a friend with no comrades. Twisted gold can't
quiet this exile, a frozen soul-cage! not all the
earth's splendor. He remembers the hall-
warriors, the treasure-receiving, how he in his
youth was reared on gold, on feasting. Joy is all
perished. For he knows he must leave a long
time the counsel of his sacred liege-lord. And
when care and sleep press upon the lone exile,
he dreams he grasps and kisses his lord, lays
hands and head on his knees, such as he did,
often, in the years past, near the gift-throne.
Then, the friendless awakes: sees around him
black waves, the bathing sea-birds, with spread
feather. Frost and snow falls, and frozen hail.
Then is the heavy heart wounded, sore for the
beloved. Care is renewed: when thoughts of
friends muddle the mind, he greets them

gratefully, examines them eagerly. Man's
 companions swim off, floating, bring no familiar
speeches. Anxiety is renewed: because he must
 send his exhausted mind often over the waves'
laces. I can't think – beyond *this* world – why
 this my soul doesn't blacken, when I ponder the
lives of warriors: how they quit the hall, smart-
 thinking, courageous young retainers. In this
way earth dies, each of all days falls. But a man
 cannot be wise ere he knows very many of the
world-kingdom's winters. A man must be
 patient: not too hot of heart, not too quick of
speech, not too timid at battle, not too wild-
 minded, not too afraid, not too elated, not too
greedy, and not too fast to boast before he
 knows. A nobleman must stand, uttering vows,
until his bold spirit, through years, knows the
 vicissitudes of his heart. A smart man must
vision the phantasmagoria: when all of this
 world stands, suddenly, in waste, how now in
various parts of this middle-earth – walls
 smolder, wind-broken, rime-ringed, the

buildings storm-beaten. Wine-halls molder,
monarchs lie dream-vacant. Soldiers are dead,
proud by the wall. War carried some off, fleeing
on paths; birds carried some off, to their cragged
nests; the gray wolf shared some with death;
some, a cheek-stained earl buried in an earth-
sepulcher. Old Builder, he wastes this earth
until a time when – clamor-absent, silent of
citizens – the Giants’ works stand idle! He who,
wise, has considered this creation, and on dark
life thought deep, cold-in-soul, remembers the
long-past slaughters often, and says these words:
‘Where went the steed? Where went the youth?
where went the treasure-giver? Where the
banquet-halls? Where the hall-spectacles? All
the bright cups! All the mailed soldiers!
Glorious princes! How that time is gone, grown
dark under night-dampening, as though it never
were!’ Now stands, testament to the loved
warrior-band, a wall high with wonders, wound
with snakes. Spears have taken the earls –
weapons wanting slaughter! Fate so great! –

storms toss that rocky slope. Snow chokes the
earth, winter's torture. Evening comes, night-

shadows darken, and the north sends hale,
furthering man's torment. All this earth-

richness is hardship-heavy; faith's making
drives the heaven-under World. Here property

passes, here friends pass, here a man has passed on! here
is a warrior passing! all this earth fundament turns to
naught!" So said the wise spirit, he sat apart: "Good is

he who grips faith, nor must a man let feelings burst
from his bosom too quickly – not till he knows, zealously,
how to cure them. Well is him who, wretched, seeks help

from the Heaven-father, who stands as our support."