

Wisdom Literature



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Christian Division of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

| Unit | Books |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Pentateuch (Torah, law) | Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy |
| Historical books | Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles |
| Wisdom books (incl. poetic books) | Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom,* Sirach/Ecclesiasticus* |
| Major Prophets | Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel |
| Minor Prophets | Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi |

* Deuterocanonical

Wisdom Books (Including the Poetic Books)

| Book | Putative Author | Genre |
|---------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Job | | Exemplum |
| Psalms | David | Hymns, laments, royal poetry |
| Proverbs | Solomon | Maxims |
| Ecclesiastes | (Another) Solomon | Life advice |
| Song of Songs | Solomon | Erotic love poetry |
| Wisdom | Solomon | Maxims |
| Sirach | Joshua ben Sirach | Maxims |

Distichs of Cato

- ▶ Anonymous maxims
- ▶ Used in schools
- ▶ 7 Latin (plus 1 OE) pre-1100 manuscript copies in English libraries

Sample

Plus vigila semper nec somno deditus esto;
Nam diuturna quies vitiis alimenta ministrat.

Always keep alert, nor be given to sleep;
For continuous idleness offers food for vice.

Text and translation Marchand; online [here](#).

The Old English *Maxims I*

204 lines of maxims contained in the **Exeter Book**; e.g.

Ræd sceal mon secgan, rune writan,
leof gesingan, lofes gearnian,
dom areccan, dæges onettan. (138–140)

Counsel should be spoken,
runes carved, songs sung,
praise earned, judgement
spoken [or: glory told], the
day occupied.

The Old English *Maxims II*

66 lines of maxims contained in Cotton MS Tiberius B I, e.g.

Soð bið switolost, sinc byð deorost,
gold gumena gehwam; and gomol snoterost,
fyrngearum frod, se þe ær feala gebideð.

Truth is clearest, treasure
dearest, gold to every man;
and an old man most learned,
wist with many years, he who
has experienced much.

Old English Wisdom Exchanges and Debate Literature

- ▶ Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* was translated in the late 9th century
- ▶ Gregory I's *Dialogues*, also translated at this time, is dialectic in form, less so in content
- ▶ The Solomon and Saturn material (two poems, two prose texts)
- ▶ *Adrian and Ritheus* (overlap with the longer prose *Solomon and Saturn*)
- ▶ (There is also a motif of the soul blaming the body for its fate, sometimes inaccurately referred to as a dialogue; the content here exchanged is more culpability than wisdom)

The *speculum regale* / Mirror for Princes Tradition (selection)

- ▶ Gregory the Great: *Pastoral Care* (c. 590)
- ▶ Alcuin: *De virtutibus et vitiis* (c. 800)
- ▶ Old Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* (c. 1250)
- ▶ Thomas Aquinas: *De regno* (1267)
- ▶ Thomas Hoccleve: *De regimine principum* (c. 1410)
- ▶ Niccolò Machiavelli: *Il principe* (c. 1513)

Old Norse Wisdom Exchanges/Debates

- ▶ Eddic poetry: *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Alvíssmál*
- ▶ Eddic prose: *Gylfaginning*

Selected Gnomic Sentences in *Beowulf* 1/2

Gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel.

(455b)

Selected Gnomes in *Beowulf* I/2

Gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel.

(455b)

Wyrð oft nereð
unfægne eorl þonne his ellen dēah.

(572b–573)

Selected Gnomic in *Beowulf* I/2

Gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel. (455b)

Wyrd oft nereð
unfægne eorl þonne his ellen dēah. (572b–573)

Swā sceal geong guma gōde gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearne,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesīpas, þonne wīg cume,
lēode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
in mægþa gehwære man gepēon. (20–25)

Selected Gnomic in *Beowulf* 2/2

Metod eallum wēold
gumena cynnes, swā hē nū gīt dēð.
Forþan bið andgit æghwær sēlest,
ferhðes foreþanc. Fela sceal gebīdan
lēofes ond lāpes sē þe longe hēr
on ðyssum windagum worolde brūceð.

(1057b–1062)

The Functions of Gnomes in *Beowulf*

- ▶ Structural/punctuation: conclude a logical section?
 - ▶ e.g. 455b “gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel” concludes a speech
 - ▶ 20–25 “swā sceal gēong guma” sits between Scyld’s life and his death
 - ▶ also note how the motif of joy in the hall is strategically placed: at 1063 it follows the “forþan bið andgit æghwær sēlest” gnome
- ▶ Suggest the wisdom of the speaker in direct speech? (Beowulf/Hrothgar)

Bibliography

- Cavill, Paul. *Maxims in Old English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Karkov, Catherine, and Robert Farrell. "The Gnostic Passages of *Beowulf*." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91, no. 3 (1990): 295–310.
- Thayer, James D. "Fractured Wisdom: The Gnomses of *Beowulf*." *English Language Notes* 41, no. 2 (December 2003): 1–18.